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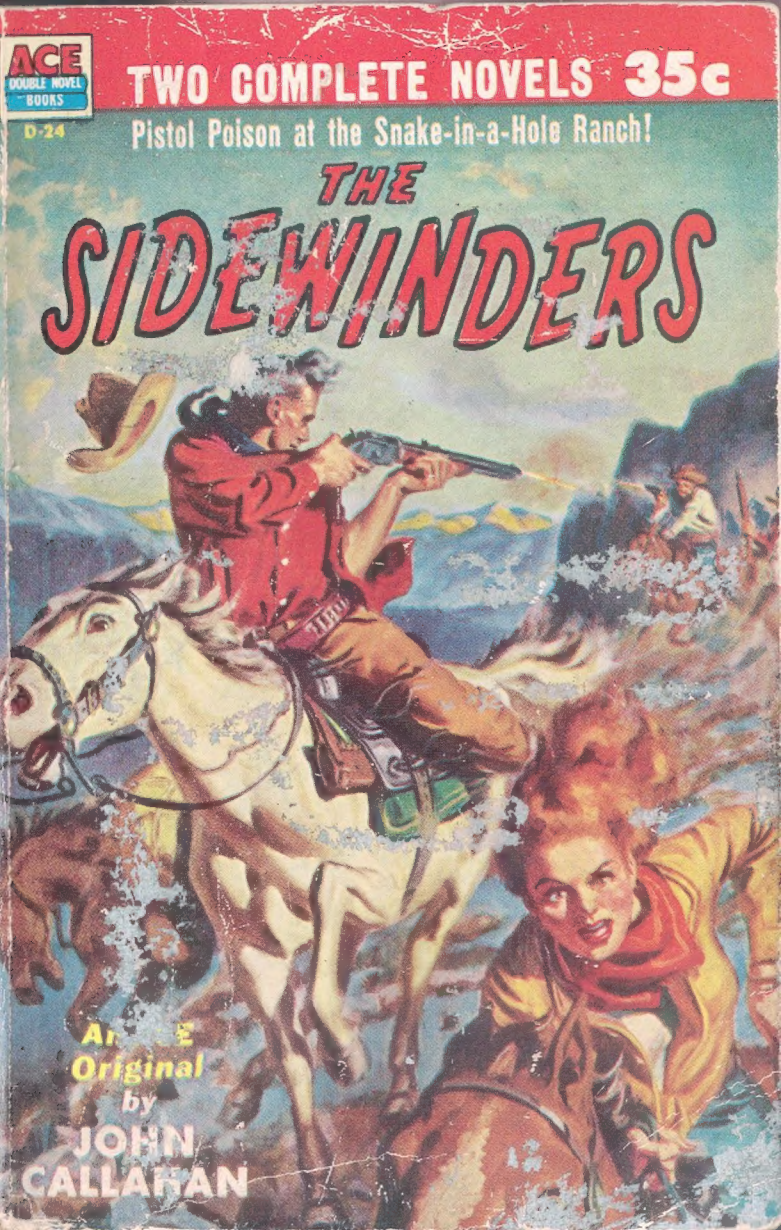
THE SIDEWINDERS



An ACE Original by JOHN CALLAHAN

"THERE'S HELL TO PAY, AND I'VE BEEN HANDED THE BILL!"

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Ed Sands had faced trouble before, but nothing like what he found when he answered John Singleton's call for help. Folks who knew called Singleton's Circle S ranch, the Snake-in-the-Hole. It didn't take Sands long to find out why. For not only were gunsmoke clouds hanging low on the horizon, but something sly and deadly was coiled in the heart of the Circle S itself.

Taking to the trail of some fast-moving longloopers, Sands learned that their rustling went hand in hand with deliberate murder. But before he could act on this discovery, sidewinder trickery forced him onto the owlhoot trail himself, with nothing between him and a hangrope but a fast horse and a loaded Colt.

This exceptional Western is an ACE Original, full of the kind of action and excitement you've learned to expect.

Turn this book over for second complete Western novel.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ED SANDS—A trouble-shooter, he found plenty to aim at on Pipestem range.

JOHN SINGLETON—He thought he owned a good spread, but what he didn't know hurt him.

RUSS NOLAN—A reckless, fighting range boss who seemed to be riding a doomed trail.

CLAIRE SINGLETON—Her ringed finger said she was a wife, but her eyes denied it.

MATT HAGARTHY—Foreman of the Snake-in-the-Hole, he was forever teased by a promise.

STACE HENDERSON—This dude spelled "business" M-o-n-k-e-y!

THE SIDEWINDERS

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by John Callahan

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23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

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Printed in U.S.A.

CHAPTER ONE

SANDS got off the train at Rawlins, tired after the long trip west from Omaha and disgruntled because, being broke, he was forced to come to such a town as this. It was a mere whistle stop, and the westbound was already pulling out as he set down his valise on the station platform, to roll a smoke.

The town consisted of one street running north and south, and it was like a hundred other cow-country towns that a man remembered but wished to forget. Beyond, in every direction, lay the Pipestem range where vast ranches represented the investment of Eastern capital, and where two-bit spreads signified the sweat, and too often the blood, of nester cowmen.

His cigarette lighted, Sands picked up his bag and angled across the dusty street separating the station, freight shed and stockpens from the westside row of plank buildings and their inviting shade. A man in the doorway of the nearby livery barn nudged his companion and inclined his head, and the two took Sands' measure from Stetson to Justin boots. They exchanged a look and a nod. They came sharply alive and rounded the corner of the barn where three more men, these perched on the corral fence, watched still another man make a show of fighting a wall-eyed roan mustang around the pen in a swirl of sun-sparkled dust.

A signal passed.

One of the pair who had noted Sands' approach now jerked a thumb in his direction. The trio on the fence craned their necks for a look. Even the bronc-peeler had his glance. And Sands, with an instinct for such things, sensed trouble in the air. *And you, brother,* he told himself, *you're a marked man already.*

He passed the barn. He was halfway past the corral when the outlaw horse hit the gate and it burst open. Horse and rider bucked into the street, wheeled, came up behind Sands. He crowded the fence, sidestepping none too soon, and so barely avoided being run down.

The roan swerved into the middle of the street, exploded into another wild spell of bucking. To an inexpert eye, it would certainly have appeared that horse and man were

really fighting each other – that the roan was doing its level best to unseat its rider, and that the man was trying with a lot of skill to tame the animal.

Sands' eyes were far from inexpert.

He was first of all a horseman, and he saw that the roan was no untamed outlaw or unbroken bronc but a mount bedevilled into a show of bucking whenever a man hit its saddle. Some men liked that sort of sport; Sands didn't, and he didn't like the purpose to which that "sport" was being now put. Yet he had to give the rider credit for making it look good, as though it were unplanned. He was a young buckaroo, but he knew horses.

Sands waited until the roan had bucked its way to the far side of the street; then he moved away from the fence. Instantly, whirling about, the roan came at him again. Sands had more time now, and he did more than jump aside. He whipped his valise up in a full-armed swing, and at the top of its arc let loose of it. The bag was a well-aimed missile, and struck the young rider full in the face. His head rocked back. Then, as his mount reared high, he tumbled backwards over its rump to land jarringly almost as soon as the valise hit the ground.

A cry, one of fright as much as of pain, had torn from him. Now, as he rolled over and sprawled flat on his face, he began to groan. The roan bucked a little longer, its empty stirrups flying. Then it trotted docilely back into the corral.

Sands picked up his valise, using his left hand, and circled the fallen rider. He faced about, and now he had the rider between him and the men over by the corral. He wanted them all there, in his range of vision. He unbuttoned his coat, and held his right hand close to his holstered gun. On the surface he appeared relaxed. Inwardly he was as taut as a drawn bowstring. He waited like that, but for the moment the men at the corral weren't ready to take a hand in the affair. They were still too surprised by the scheme's misfiring. The fallen rider wasn't going to do anything about it just yet, either. The breath had been knocked out of him, and he made retching sounds trying to get air back into his lungs.

He was a slightly built youth. His yellowish hair was worn long as a sort of vanity. His cheeks were smooth, without

much more than fuzz on them. He was, in Sands' opinion, almost pretty.

Hands to ground, he levered himself up and heaved over to a sitting position. He tried to retrieve his hat from the dust, but couldn't quite reach it without moving. He didn't look as though he felt like moving. Blood trickled from his nose. He wiped it away on his shirt sleeve. He looked up at Sands, and a spasm of hate, twisted his face until it lost its near-prettiness.

"Friend," said Sands, "you almost got yourself hurt."

"You son of a bitch," the youth croaked. "You dirty —"

Sands eyes chilled. "Sonny, maybe I misunderstood you," he said flatly. "You'd better say that again. If it's what I think you said, I'll kick it back down your throat."

"Who in hell do you think you are, anyway?"

"Sands is the name. Ed Sands. Don't forget it, sonny."

The youth didn't say anything to that but sat there glaring at Sands, his face an animated mask of rage and hate. One of the others came over from the corral. It was the man who had showed the first interest in Sands and given the signal for the rigged show of bucking that had been no more, no less than an attack upon the visitor to Rawlins. He was a burly man, stockier than Sands but not quite so tall. His hat was pushed back off his brow, revealing a lock or two of reddish-brown hair. His eyes were a bright blue in a ruddy, coarsely handsome face. He was a man of about thirty; he moved with a swagger, a certain brazen cockiness. There was always one like this fellow, Ed Sands knew — in every town, on every range, in any sizable crew — a man tough and reckless, maybe more than a little wild. This man, Sands judged, would be rough with any horse he rode, with any man who crossed him. *Tough hand,* Sands told himself.

"Accidents will happen," the tough hand said, halting by the youth on the ground but looking squarely at Sands. His voice had a free and easy lilt, but his china-blue eyes were wary. "Tip's good with a bronc, but that roan's a damn' outlaw."

"Friend, if that roan is an outlaw — so am I."

"That could be. What did you say your name is?"

"Your hearing is good, friend."

The burly man chuckled. He threw back his head and laughed heartily. "Sands, I almost like you. You're tough and you're smart, and a man like that I like. Russ Nolan's my name. I've got a ranch up on the Lost Squaw. Horses, mostly. A few cattle. If you ever get up that way, stop by. I've got a keg of rotgut aging, and I'll tap it for a visitor like you."

Sands pondered that, wondering what might be behind the invitation. Things were moving a little too fast for him, even though he liked to travel in fast company. He said, "Thanks. I may stop by. Don't be surprised if I do. Meanwhile, Nolan, don't sic young Tip onto me again."

"Again?" said Nolan, grinning. "It looked like an accident to me."

Sands matched the grin with a false one. "Next time do your own 'accidents,'" he said. "Keep Tip out of it. I'd hate to see a pretty boy like that get really mussed up." He nodded in friendly fashion, gave Tip a narrow look, and started to turn away. Russ Nolan's, "Oh, Sands," turned him back.

Nolan said, "You'll find John Singleton at the hotel."

Sands stared at him, showing some slight surprise.

Nolan laughed. "Singleton is a big, important man. You can't expect his sort to meet you at the station," he said mockingly. "Tell him, Sands, that Russ Nolan said he's brought a good man to Pipestem range. Luck to you, friend."

Sands stared a moment longer at the man, deciding that he would never sell Russ Nolan short. A tough hand with a sharp mind always meant trouble. Sands said dryly, "Thanks," and again turned away, hunching his shoulders a little, against his will, as he realized how easy it would be for Nolan or Tip to back-shoot him.

The Rawlins House, one of the few two-storeyed buildings, was on the sunny side of the street, so Sands had to cross again. A rider sat a pinto pony by the hotel's awninged porch, and at first glance Sands thought it was another pretty, long-haired bravo like Tip. He took a second glance and let it linger. The rider was a girl in masculine range clothes. It was becoming a sort of fashion in parts of the cattle country for young women to wear denim pants and to ride astride, but Sands wasn't sure that he liked the style.

Her hat hung at her shoulders by its chin strap, and her hair was prettily tousled. She was eying Sands gravely, frowning slightly, and there was an air of excitement about her. No doubt she had watched the affair at the livery barn. She leaned forward in the saddle, as Sands neared the hotel steps, and said demandingly, "You're Sands?"

He halted, bowed slightly. "You have the advantage of me."

He was no longer surprised that anyone, perhaps everyone, in this town should know his name. He was merely puzzled at finding himself so important. Not important enough to be gunned down, but important enough to be ridden down. Not important enough to be met at the station by the man who had sent for him, yet important enough to be greeted by a very attractive young woman. His bewilderment showed on his angular face as he looked up at her.

"Yes, I'm Ed Sands," he said. "And you . . . ?"

She ignored his query. "Sands, get out of this town," she said. "You're not welcome here – or anywhere on Pipestem range."

During a rather checkered career, Sands had more than once been told that his departure was preferred to his continued presence. On occasion, the situation had been such that he had departed without argument. At other times, he had played stubborn and stayed where he was unwelcome. But never had he been ordered to clear out by anyone so pretty. The novelty of it fascinated him, and a smile played across his rather grim mouth. When he smiled, Ed Sands possessed a kind of charm.

"Have you come far to tell me this?" he asked, amused.

"I'd ride ten times as far to tell you."

"That I can believe. But why?"

The girl regarded him with dislike, almost with revulsion. A quirt dangled from her right wrist, and now, catching it by the stock, she struck it sharply against her leg. He had a notion that she would like to use that quirt on him.

"Why? Because I know your reason for coming here," she said. "Because I know that you're a trouble maker, and that my father sent for you because of that. And I don't want to see you turned loose on this range."

"So you're John Singleton's daughter, are you?"

"Are you going to do as I tell you?"

"Not at the moment," Sands said. His amusement was gone. This was a serious thing: a father and daughter at odds. "If there's trouble here, I didn't bring it with me. My idea is that John Singleton sent for me to stamp it out, not help it along."

"It will die out of its own accord, if you stay out of it."

"I'll do this much for you: I'll mention that to your father."

The girl slapped her leg with the quirt again. Fury was bright in her eyes. It was obvious that she was accustomed to having her own way. "Don't mock me, Sands," she said fiercely. "I warn you that if you stay here, I'll find a way to keep you from meddling in what doesn't concern you. So help me, I'll find a way!"

With that, she neck-reined her pinto about and rode away.

Sands turned and stared after her, a look of wonder in his eyes. She did not go far. Angling across the street, she dismounted before a little shop bearing a small, neat sign that read: *Mrs. Burton Dressmaking & Notions*. She left the pinto ground-hitched and disappeared into the shop. Sands shrugged and turned into the hotel.

The lobby was empty except for a fat man reading a newspaper behind the desk. He looked up, said, "Mr. Singleton is waiting for you in Room 12, Mr. Sands. Go right up."

Sands deposited his valise on the floor at one end of the counter. He said, "Look, friend, isn't it possible that I could be somebody other than Sands?" He was beginning to be annoyed by everybody taking him for granted.

"Mr. Singleton is expecting a man named Sands," the hotelman said. "Nobody but you got off the train. Logic. You're Sands."

"Singleton tells everybody his business?"

"He told me about you so I could send you up."

"And he told Russ Nolan too, eh?"

"I doubt it, Mr. Sands. Mr. Singleton and Russ Nolan don't speak."

Sands turned toward the stairs, feeling as though he had come out second best in this encounter as he had in that with

the Singleton girl, and in the one with Russ Nolan. It must have been only luck that had permitted him to come out on top in his brush with the bronc-peeler called Tip. He was beginning to dislike Rawlins more by the minute.

The door to Room 12 swung open as Sands reached the upstairs hall, and John Singleton called, "Hello there, Ed. It's good to see you again." He was holding out his hand, smiling in friendly fashion. "How many years has it been, anyway?"

Sands shook hands and said that it was seven, eight years. They looked each other over to see what changes the years had wrought. Singleton was a man in early fifties now, a full score of years older than Sands. It was like a meeting of teacher and pupil after a long passage of time; that, in a way, had been their relationship. Ed Sands had been a range orphan of twelve when John Singleton took him under his wing. At twelve, a skinny kid without much promise showing, Ed Sands had traveled with a herd up the Chisholm Trail from Texas, with Singleton the trail-boss. He'd stayed with the rancher for the next fifteen years, and in that time John Singleton, the cowman, had taught him all there was to know about cattle, horses, and men. . . . Singleton had taken him in without adopting him, and so their relationship had lacked a father-and-son intimacy. But they had been friends, not just boss and hired hand.

Singleton had changed.

His temples were now brushed with white, and there was gray in his close-clipped mustache. His face had thinned down, and lost its leathery look. He no longer wore range clothes; he was expensively tailored. In fact, John Singleton might now be mistaken for a prosperous merchant or a banker. He'd mellowed, lost his roughness and perhaps his toughness. He looked like a man who had attained his goal in life, not like one out to whip the world. Sands sensed that John Singleton the cowman had faded into the past, and that here was a new John Singleton with whom he would have to become acquainted. The older man seemed to read Sands' mind. He smiled wryly, and said, "Yes, I've changed. Or rather, maybe I've gone back to being what I always was."

Singleton laughed shortly, then said with a sudden heartiness, "Come inside, Ed. Come in and meet Mrs. Singleton."

Sands gave him a surprised look. Singleton had lost his wife, the mother of the girl Sands had encountered on the street, fifteen or more years ago. So far as Sands knew, the man had never showed the slightest interest in another woman. He caught Sands' surprised look and said, "As I said, Ed, I've changed." He led the way into the room.

She sat by the window, gazing out it, an expression of boredom on her face. She looked around only when her husband said, "Claire, allow me to present my old friend, Ed Sands. Ed, Mrs. Singleton." She arose, and a smile swept away the bored look. She crossed to Sands, holding out a gloved hand. He removed his hat, took her hand, said something appropriate. Claire Singleton said, "I feel as though I already know you, Mr. Sands. John has spoken of you so often."

A beautiful woman was exactly that even when she was the wife of a friend, and Sands caught himself staring. She was tall and finely formed, and her features were as perfect as a cameo cut by a master craftsman: auburn hair, a wealth of it; green-gray eyes; full, red lips. She was fashionably dressed, sleekly groomed. To Singleton's fifty-odd years she was possibly thirty. She was the sort of woman, Sands decided, a man would choose once he no longer needed a helpmate and could afford a playmate. Her hand was small in Sands' and very soft. There was an impression of fragility. Yet, upon looking closer, Ed Sands thought he detected a core of tough resiliency that was much like toughness in a man. A woman like this, he knew, would not be an unmixed blessing.

He said, "I did not know there was a Mrs. Singleton." He glanced at Singleton as the woman withdrew her hand from his. "Congratulations," he said. "You have good taste, John."

Singleton laughed. "I'll admit to that."

His wife laughed, too. Her laughter was throaty but very pleasant to a man's ears. Sands found himself looking at her again. She said, "Don't give him credit for that, Mr. Sands. When I met him in Chicago, John was such a confirmed bachelor that he didn't realize I was of the opposite sex. If I hadn't decided that he'd been a bachelor too long, he would still be that." She moved closer to Singleton, laid a hand on

his arm." I saw Laurie ride in. I'll go down and join her, and leave you two to talk business." She gave Sands a smile and turned to the door.

Singleton went out to the hall with her, and Sands moved to the window. He took the chair where the woman had been sitting. She had seen Laurie Singleton ride in, and so she must have been seated by the window during Sands' encounter with Tip and Nolan. Yes, there was a good view of the livery barn from that position. . . . Sands wondered why she had failed to mention anything at all of what she must have seen happen there.

CHAPTER TWO

SANDS was thoughtfully rolling a smoke when Singleton returned and asked, "A drink, Ed?" He caught Sands' slight nod, turned to a table at the side of the room. The table contained a bottle and glasses, an opened box of cigars, a litter of papers, and writing materials. Evidently, Singleton had been doing some paper work while waiting. He now poured whiskey into the glasses, water glasses they were, and he wasn't stingy with it. Sands noticed that the hand holding the bottle was none too steady. He noticed too that now, with his wife gone, Singleton permitted a troubled look to show on his face.

Singleton handed Sands one of the glasses, and Sands said, "Here's looking at you, John." They drank, and the whiskey was mellow. Sands said, "No redeye that. Imported stuff, eh?"

Singleton said, "A man likes the best when he can afford it."

"Yeah. I'm beginning to see that."

"And the best is expensive."

"It probably is," said Sands, and he wondered if they both were thinking of Claire Singleton as well as of whiskey. "I guess a man has to pay for whatever he gets – and keep on paying. How's Russ Nolan fit into it, John?"

Singleton gave a start. "You've still got your nose for trouble," he said, smiling wryly. "How did you find out

Nolan so soon? I mentioned no names in the letter I wrote you."

"I met him a couple minutes after I got off the train."

"He's here in town?" Singleton seemed incredulous.

Sands told him about that tricky business at the livery barn. And added, "Mrs. Singleton must have seen it from this window. Didn't she mention that something was happening down there?"

A cloudy look came to the older man's eyes. He said casually, too casually, "I was busy with some paper work there at the table. Perhaps Claire mentioned it, and I didn't hear. It's like that with a married man, Ed. He can't listen to everything his wife chatters about."

Sands nodded, and had the thought that Claire Singleton wasn't apt to be a wife that chattered. He was sure that she had not said a word about what had happened at the livery barn. To make sure she could have witnessed it, he glanced from the window. He could see that part of the street, all right. At the moment, Russ Nolan and Tip and a couple other men were riding away from the barn and coming along the street at a slow walk. Sands looked back at Singleton.

"Let's get down to business," he said. "Russ Nolan knew about my coming, and rigged an attack on me that was supposed to look like an accident. He doesn't have anything against me personally, doesn't even know me, so he wanted to rough me because he'd heard that I'm your man. What's it all about?"

"There's hell to pay," said John Singleton. "And I've been handed the bill."

Laurie Singleton's errand to Mrs. Burton's shop wasn't very important. She merely wanted to buy a spool of green silk thread. But Mrs. Burton was a gossip, and Laurie, for all her blunt talk to Ed Sands, was a polite person. She listened for some minutes to the dressmaker, then managed to leave just as Russ Nolan and his hands came along. Laurie's anger had been simmering all the while she was in the shop, and now, seeing Russ Nolan, it began to boil again. She left Mrs.

Burton's door and motioned to the man. He swung over, reined in beside Laurie's pinto, smiling ruefully.

"He's not just a man with a rep," he said. "Not a four-flusher. He's smart and he's tough. Sands – he's got plenty of sand in him. Rough him up, you said. Scare him off. Hell, Laurie."

"I saw it," said Laurie. "You didn't half try."

"If we'd tried any harder, somebody would have got shot."

"I didn't see him go for his gun."

Nolan shrugged. "You didn't see the look in his eyes, either," he said. "You've got that one pegged wrong, baby. You figure he's a trouble maker. which he probably is. You figure he can be bluffed, which he sure can't. There's a man, I'm telling you."

"So I should let Dad turn him loose?"

"What else can you do?"

"What you didn't have the nerve to do," Laurie said bitterly. "I still say that his kind, men with reputations as gun hands, can be scared off:" Her cheeks were flushed with her anger, her eyes bright. "I'll not let up on him. I'll find a way to scare him off."

Nolan laughed. "Bushwhack him, maybe?"

"That's an idea, all right."

"Now, baby, don't you fool with that man."

Laurie's temper flared. "You take it as a joke," she said. "But John Singleton will turn him loose on you – for one. Can't you see that? You and every other man that wife of his ever smiled on. That's his reason for bringing Sands here, to keep her skirts clean."

Russ Nolan's amusement faded, was replaced by a frown. "Honey, you're talking without thinking," he said. "Look, it's your father you're talking about." His voice hardened. "As for Sands, I'll take care of him if he's sicced onto me. You don't need to take my part. Nobody needs to take Russ Nolan's part."

He gave her a curt nod and turned his horse away.

Laurie gazed after him, a trace of hurt in her eyes. When she saw him swing across the street and pull up to talk to Claire Singleton, her hurt look gave way to one of fury.

John Singleton was slow in getting around to talking. He seemed not to know how to begin. But finally, after getting a cigar lighted, he said, "Ed, it's rustler trouble. My Circle-S range is being raided with the regularity of clockwork. I suspect Russ Nolan has a hand in it. Maybe he's the man leading the long-ropers. But I can't prove it. I lost my temper the last time I ran into him — and called him a thief."

"That's not like you, John," Sands said. "Calling a man 'thief' on suspicion alone. How did Nolan take it?"

"He laughed in my face."

"He would. He's got the devil in him, that buckaroo."

"I don't like being laughed at, Ed."

"Who does?" said Sands. "You want me to prove Nolan is a thief. Right?"

Singleton studied the burning of his cigar, the frown still on his face. He gave Sands the impression that there was a lot more to it than a matter of rustling, that there was much he didn't want to put into words. His reluctance puzzled Sands. A glance from the window gave Ed Sands a murky suspicion. Closeby the hotel, Russ Nolan sat his horse and talked to Claire Singleton. The woman's back was toward Sands, but he could see Russ Nolan's half-handsome face. It wore a grin that was not necessarily one of amusement. It could be one of intimacy. Sands thought, *John, your wife and that tough hand?* But it wasn't a question to be put to a friend.

Singleton said, "Ed, you can start with that."

Sands looked at him. "With proving Nolan guilty of rustling — or innocent," he said. "All right, John. But it seems to me that your crew could handle this rustling trouble. Or the law could."

"My crew could be in on it."

"Ah?"

"As for the law," Singleton added. "Well, we're a long way from the county seat and the sheriff has more to do than gunguard my range." He moved restlessly about the cramped room. "I've a good range boss," he said. "Hagarthy's his name. Matt Hagarthy. He's been with me a long time. He's tried, but he hasn't been able to break up the rustling." He halted

abruptly, gave Sands a wry smile. "By the way, my Circle-S Ranch has come to be known at the Snake-in-the-Hole."

Sands' interest sharpened. "Hanging a nickname on a man or an outfit is one way of showing hate," he stated. "Any reason for a lot of people to hate your outfit?"

"Nobody loves a successful man, Ed," Singleton replied. "But I've gone out of my way to treat my neighbors fairly."

"Give me an example."

"Well, I have more range than I use. I've allowed some dirt farmers to squat on a part of it," Singleton said. "A part called the Bench. They moved in at a time when I was away on a trip to Chicago." He gave Sands another of his wry smiles. "To court Claire. When I returned, I – well, I let them stay on. Is that example enough?"

"I guess so. But still – Snake-in-the-Hole?"

"Maybe you can find out why such a name."

"I intend to."

"Then you've decided to take the job?"

"I owe it to you to take it, John."

Singleton said, "You owe me nothing, Ed. And I'm not asking a favor. What were you earning as a trouble shooter for that railroad being built over in Nevada?"

"One hundred and fifty a month."

"You'll be getting two hundred at Circle-S."

Sands nodded. "There's one other thing," he said. "I met your daughter outside the hotel. She told me this trouble would die out of its own accord if I kept out of it. I promised her that I'd mention that to you." He watched Singleton closely for his reaction.

The man's frown deepened. "Never mind Laurie," he said, and looked at his watch. "I'll have to ask you to excuse me now, Ed. I've an appointment with Banker Judson Ames. Make yourself comfortable, help yourself to the whiskey." He picked up his hat, went to the door. "We'll meet for supper downstairs at six, and afterward start for Circle-S."

He went out, and Ed Sands sat there for a few minutes thinking over what the rancher had told him. He came to the conclusion that Singleton had left more unsaid than he had revealed. He didn't like that. A man needed to know what he was up against when he took a job of trouble shooting, and all

Sands knew was that he was up against trouble. He shrugged, rose, and left the room.

Sands went as far as the hotel porch, lounged against one of the awning posts, and watched what little activity there was on the street. The Nolan bunch was gone. Laurie Singleton's pinto stood groundhitched before the dressmaker's shop, and Sands supposed that the girl and her step-mother were in that place. He could see the "S"-in-a-circle brand on the pinto's left hip. *Snake-in-the-Hole,* he thought. It wasn't a nice nickname.

A bunch of kids were at noisy play down by the livery barn. A movement at a second-story window, over a hardware store, caught Sands' eye. Two men were looking his way from the window. They drew back hastily as he gazed directly at them. He noticed the lettering on the window. It read: *Rawlins Development Co. – F. A. Clayton, Mgr.* Lettering on a second window to the same office read: *Properties Bought, Sold, Leased.*

An open stairway at the side of the building led to the door of the Rawlins Development Company, and shortly two men descended it. They walked toward one of the town's saloons, giving Sands furtive glances. One was enormously fat and past middle age. He wore a shapeless straw hat and a rumpled tan suit of light-weight material. His companion was much younger, darkly handsome. He was as well tailored as John Singleton. *A couple of tinhorns,* Sands told himself. He wondered if they too were interested in him or just curious.

He took out makings, rolled a cigarette, and shortly saw Singleton's wife and daughter come from the dressmaker's shop. The older woman was smiling, but the girl shook her head, frowningly to whatever was said to her, and strode to her horse. *A nasty temper there,* Sands told himself. He watched Laurie mount and ride his way. She reined in and faced him. She said brusquely, "Well?"

"I mentioned it to your father," Sands said, removing his hat and getting rid of his cigarette. "He didn't agree that the trouble would die a natural death if I kept out of it."

"So you're staying?"

"Yes, Miss Singleton. We'll be seeing a lot of each other."

"Not if I can help it," she retorted. "And don't take off

your hat every time you look at me. I'm not that much of a lady. Save your manners for somebody who's used to fancy airs. Somebody like the second Mrs. Singleton."

Sands shook his head, smiling. "I think I'll always take off my hat to you," he said. "And I hope we'll get to be friends."

"Not a chance, Sands."

"Time will tell."

"Not if I can help it," said Laurie fiercely. "I don't think you're going to stay long on Pipestem range. Maybe my father's impressed by your reputation, but I'm not. I'd gamble that you'll run when you find out what you're up against. No man has the nerve to stand up against bushwhack bullets, Sands."

"Then you needn't worry about my staying," he said. "Not if I'm going to run as soon as I meet up with some of your Pipestem trouble."

She looked at him with exasperation, then turned her pony away. She lifted it to a lope and left town by a west road. Sands was still looking after her when Claire Singleton reached the porch steps. She came and stood by Sands, smiling. "Laurie really isn't always like that, Mr. Sands," she said. "It's just that she feels so strongly about this trouble."

"About my coming here, you mean?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel about it, Mrs. Singleton?"

"I must feel that my husband knows what he's doing, naturally."

Sands was sharply aware of her beauty. In fact, just looking at her caused his pulse to quicken. He decided that if this was the sort of woman a man with money came by, he too should be rich. Yet he was convinced that such a woman might easily make a man miserable. He said, "I'd like to ask you a question, Mrs. Singleton."

She laughed in her throaty way. "Why not?"

"In fact, several questions."

"Do, Mr. Sands."

He had the feeling that she found him somehow amusing. "Why didn't you tell your husband that I was having trouble with Russ Nolan and his crowd?"

"Are you sure I saw that you were having trouble?"

"As sure as I'm looking at you now."

"Perhaps I decided that it wasn't my affair to tell him."

Sands said, "I see." He didn't see, at all.

"And the next question, Mr. Sands?"

"Who told Russ Nolan that I was arriving today?"

"Do you suspect that I told him?"

"I don't know what I suspect," he said. "Let's skip the rest of the questions until another time. Until we know each other better."

Claire simulated a look of indignation. "Mr. Sands, I am a married woman," she said, with mock reproach. "It's hardly likely that you and I shall get to know each other better." Her laughter came again, and she turned away.

Sands and the Singletons met for supper, but, since the meal was eaten at a table accommodating a half-dozen other diners, there was little talk between them. Sands noticed that John Singleton ate little, and seemed more troubled since his visit with the banker than before it. Claire Singleton merely picked at her food, and it was evident that she didn't care for fried steak, boiled potatoes, and dried-apple pie. Sands ate with relish; he always had an appetite. When they left the dining room, they encountered the fat man whom Sands had seen come from the office over the hardware store.

The fat man halted, blocking their way with his bulk. He removed his battered straw hat, bowed as far as it was possible for so thick a man to bow. He was bald except for a fringe of gray-brown hair. He showed a beaming smile.

"Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Singleton!" he exclaimed. "A pleasure!"

Singleton said mildly, "Hello, Able. How are you?"

"Fine, fine," said the fat man. He gazed at Sands, questioningly.

"Mr. Sands, Mr. Clayton," Singleton said. "Ed, Able is the man who founded Rawlins. You might say that he sired it. There was nothing here but an empty grass flat when he first came by and decided that Pipestem range should have a town."

Able Clayton looked properly modest. "I merely encouraged folks to come here," he said. "To make a small profit for myself, you understand." He looked like a fool, with that too

broad smile on his flabby face, but his eyes were shrewd — almost cunning. He said, "John, I've been hoping to see you. I wanted to talk to you about that strip of range you call the Bench."

Singleton shook his head. "It's not for sale, Able," he said, "It would mean clearing out those squatters, and I — well, I haven't the heart to do that."

"Well, I haven't a buyer for it at the moment, anyway," Clayton said, looking bland now. "It would be just a matter of speculation if I was able to buy it."

He bowed again and stepped aside.

A buckboard and team had been brought from the livery barn, and the hostler was holding the horses. Singleton handed the man some money, helped his wife to the forward seat. Sands climbed to the rear seat with his valise. Singleton got in, untied the reins from the whipstock, and the team, a pair of fine grays, was eager to get going. It was nearly full dark when they drove from Rawlins and took the west road. Singleton kept the grays moving at a fast trot for mile after mile. Little was said: Mrs. Singleton spoke once or twice, but her husband's replies were mere grunts. Sands' feeling that all was not right between the couple grew stronger, and he thought of the woman talking to Russ Nolan on the street of Rawlins.

It was none of his business, Sands told himself. He was here on Pipestem range to put a stop to the rustling of Circle-S stock. If Russ Nolan was stealing John Singleton's stock, Ed Sands would have to do something about it. If Russ Nolan was carrying on with John Singleton's wife, that needn't concern Ed Sands. Or so he tried to tell himself.

But he wasn't so sure, and he didn't like his doubts of John Singleton. He didn't like to think that the man had changed so much that he would call in a trouble shooter to settle his marital affairs. He didn't want to think that Singleton had sunk so low. . . . Still, there was more to this affair than met the eye. John Singleton wasn't the man he once had been. The core of him seemed to have grown soft. And a man turned soft inside might hire another, tougher man to kill his snakes for him, several kinds of snakes. *Snake-in-the Hole,* Ed

Sands thought, and he wondered about that nickname again.

The road swung northwest, wound through some low hills. There was a moon over Sands' left shoulder. It was low in the sky, huge and blood red. There was a creek ahead, a plank bridge spanning it, and Singleton slowed his team. The horses were close to the bridge when there came the sharp report of a rifle.

Sands heard the shriek of the slug just behind him. He saw that Singleton hauled back on the reins to halt the team. "Keep moving," Sands yelled. "Get out of here, John!" The buckboard started out again with a sudden lurch, and Sands, gun in hand, jumped to the ground.

Two more shots came, so close that Sands again heard the shriek of the slugs. He dived for the cover of a boulder at the side of the road, and peered toward the tangle of brush from which the shots had come. He had seen the powder flashes of the last two shots, but now saw nothing at all. He heard the buckboard racketing across the bridge and then race on more quietly when it hit the road beyond. Soon its sound faded into the distance.

Sands waited, his nerves feeling knotted. His position was none too good. The range was too long for his hand-gun, but it was easy enough for the ambusher's rifle. If he tried to get closer to the brush, the hidden man would pick him off unless he were as bad a marksman as his first three shots indicated. The quiet stretched thin, and Sands grew cramped in his crouched position. The tension in him became a dull ache.

Russ Nolan?

He answered his own question with a shake of his head. He might be wrong, but he couldn't quite see Nolan as a bushwhacker, or so poor a shot. He was vastly puzzled. The ambusher could only be an enemy of John Singleton's, yet his shot had been aimed not at the rancher but at Sands. That didn't make sense. Why aim for the hired hand when the employer had been no more difficult a target? Sands had no answers at all, and he was keenly aware that answers would do him no good at all unless he found a way to silence that bushwhack rifle.

Sands had but one recognizable feeling when he heard the bushwhacker in noisy flight: relief. He had been worried;

yes, and scared. He was no bravo with a six-shooter, not foolhardy enough to buck a rifle even in the hands of so poor a marksman. In fact, Sands was not, in the real sense of the word, a gunfighter. A trouble shooter, yes. But there was a difference, and, like any normal man, he had known fear for several long minutes and now felt a vast relief.

He would have liked to discover the bushwhacker's identity, and so, once he was sure the fellow was really gone, he moved forward to the brush thicket. He had marked the spot where he saw the shadowy figure start its wild flight, and, reaching it, struck a match.

The flickering light showed him an empty cartridge. He picked it up — a .30-30 shell. That told him nothing at all. If he had a dollar for every man who packed a .30-30 on his saddle . . . He saw it just as the match flame died. He struck another match, stooped, picked up a brand-new spool of green thread.

A startled look crossed his face. "Well, I'll be damned," he muttered, then chuckled.

That Laurie Singleton was one to keep her word. She had threatened him, and she had done her best to carry out her threat. Yes, he had to take his hat off to that girl!

CHAPTER THREE

SANDS retraced his steps to the road, paused on the bridge to roll and light a cigarette, then went on. Like any horseman, he didn't like walking. He was beginning to wonder how far he would have to hoof it when John Singleton's voice reached out of the darkness. "That you, Ed?"

Sands said, "Yeah, John." He saw the man now, a slight figure standing very rigid in the middle of the road. Singleton had a gun in his hand. He said, "You're all right? You're not hurt?"

"I'm not hurt."

"The bushwhacker?"

"Hightailed it," said Sands.

The buckboard was a few steps farther along the road, and Mrs. Singleton was holding the reins. The grays were acting up a little, a bit skittish, but she had them under control.

Sands couldn't make out her expression in the darkness, but there was no excitement in her voice as she said, "So you came back unharmed, Mr. Sands." He thought, *The women in this Pipestem country!* Singleton was troubled if his wife was not, and asked, "Did you get a look at the man, Ed?"

"He was just a shadowy shape, John."

"Well, there'll be tracks to follow in the morning."

"That's possible," Sands admitted.

Singleton gave him a searching look. "You don't seem interested," he said peevishly. "It seems to me those tracks —"

"John," Sands cut in, "you brought me here to buck some trouble you couldn't handle. Let me buck it in my own way. Maybe I'll look for tracks, maybe I won't." His voice was suddenly harsh. "Don't try to think for me, John."

Singleton stared at him, finally said, "All right, Ed. I suppose you know what you're doing," and climbed into the buckboard.

After some miles, Sands saw tiny specks of light in the distance. The lights grew and took shape, as Singleton tooled the grays along at a faster pace, and became lamplit windows. Shortly they swung up to Circle-S headquarters, crossed the wide ranchyard, and Singleton halted the rig before a big log-and-stone ranchhouse. A door opened almost immediately, and a Chinese servant limned against the yellow glow from within. A man came from the bunkhouse, saying, " 'Evening, folks." Singleton gave him the reins, and said, "Charlie, tell Matt I want to see him."

Sands climbed out, helped Mrs. Singleton step down, then lifted his valise from the buckboard. He glanced toward the corral, but it was too distant and the darkness too thick for him to pick out Laurie's pinto among the horses there. He would have liked to look at her pony, just to be sure. Almost certainly, if it were there, it would be warm and winded.

Singleton led the way into the house, and Sands followed Claire. She told the Chinese servant to take Sands' valise, but Sands, setting it down to one side of the hallway, said, "Never mind." The woman gave him a curious look. "Aren't you staying here at the house?" she asked.

"At the bunkhouse," he told her. "I'm just a hired hand, Mrs. Singleton,"

She glanced at her husband, but he said, with a shrug, "Let Ed have his own way, my dear." He smiled wryly. "He insists on it. Ed, come into my study. When Matt Hagarthy comes in, we'll go into this business more thoroughly."

He went to a room to the left of the hallway, and Claire started toward the stairs. The Chinese went back along the hallway. Sands glanced through the doorway to the right, into the living room, and saw Laurie at the far end of the room. She was curled up in an armchair by a big stone fireplace, gazing at the blazing logs. She looked as though she had been there a long time. But Sands was sure that she hadn't. He turned into the room.

It was comfortably furnished, and everywhere was evidence of a woman's touch. Laurie didn't look around as he walked toward her. He took out makings, rolled and lighted a cigarette, tossed the match into the fire. She still didn't look at him.

He took the spool of thread from his pocket, laid it on the arm of her chair. "You'll probably be needing that," he said, and saw her eyes widen with alarm as she stared at it.

"Where . . . ?" she said, her hand going to her shirt pocket.

"Where?" said Sands. "Can't you guess where I found it?"

Laurie tried to speak but could not. Her eyes were wide with fright. Sands suddenly pitied her. He smiled and said almost gently, "I know. You didn't try to hit me with those shots. You just wanted to scare me. 'Scare him and he'll run,' you told yourself."

Laurie said, "Sands — " Her voice broke, and she couldn't continue.

Sands reached out, touched her shoulder. "Nobody is going to know about it," he told her. "Nobody but you and I. We'll have a talk tomorrow, and see if we can't be friends."

He turned away, and he could feel Laurie's gaze following him as he left the living room.

John Singleton's study was a smaller room, and wholly a man's room. There were Navajo rugs on the floor. There was a gun rack on one wall, and close by it a pair of mounted steer horns, needle sharp and of enoromous spread. Singleton's

desk was an old rolltop with a student lamp atop it. There were three leather armchairs.

Singleton sat at the desk, and Matt Hagarthy stood by it.

When Singleton introduced Sands to his ranch boss, Hagarthy grudgingly offered his hand and gave a miserly nod. He was a man of about forty-five, and the years had weathered and hardened him until his face was leathery and craggy. There was no friendliness about him. He offered none to Sands and showed that he expected none in return.

Singleton said, "I've told Matt why you're here, Ed. He understands that you're not to be considered one of the crew, and that you will take orders only from me."

"One thing," said Hagarthy. "Does Sands give me orders?"

Singleton glanced at Sands, who said, "No. I'll give no orders here. I won't meddle with any of Circle-S's crew. That is, so long as none of them is mixed up in the rustling."

Hagarthy's face darkened. "My crew is clean, Sands."

"That's nice to know, friend."

"You don't believe it?"

Sands shrugged. "I'll take your word for it," he said. "But I like to see things with my own eyes."

Singleton said worriedly, "Take it easy, you two. I don't want you at cross purposes. Matt, I've told Ed that I suspect Russ Nolan. I could be wrong, as you believe. It may be the squatters on the Bench who are doing the rustling. It's for Ed to find out."

Hagarthy's eyes were ugly. "I never said you were wrong about Nolan," he said. "I suspect him along with the squatter crowd. He's friendly enough with them. What I've been claiming all along, from start to finish, is that the one way to end the stealing is to clear the Bench of squatters. That way we'd have an open strip between Circle-S and Nolan's malpais spread. Nolan would think twice before he ran stolen cattle across empty country where tracking him would be easy."

That was probably a long speech for Matt Hagarthy, and to Ed Sands it sounded like one that had been well thought out and well memorized. He studied the Circle-S ramrod, and he could see hate in the man. Hagarthy's hatred might be for Russ Nolan, but more likely it was for the squatters. Seldom

did a cowman — and Hagarthy was certainly that, not merely a run-of-the-mill ranch boss — have anything but hatred for squatters: squatters, homesteaders — men who used plows to turn the grass under.

But Sands' attention was drawn to Singleton, who would have the final say in whatever was to happen. Singleton was leaning back in his chair, puffing on his cigar, and there was in his eyes a craftiness that Sands hadn't known him to possess. Sands had seen this in other men. Men who played their cards close to their chests, men who had learned to work — or scheme — in devious ways. It was as Sands had suspected when they talked in the hotel room: there was more to this affair than John Singleton permitted to meet the eye.

Singleton said finally, "We'll leave it to Ed. If he says the squatters must go, once he's looked into this thing, then — well, they'll go. We'll clear the Bench from one end to the other."

Hagarthy said sourly, "All right. You want me for anything else?"

"No," Singleton told him. "That's about all now, Matt."

Hagarthy grunted, turned toward the door.

Sands said, "Hagarthy, I'll put up in the bunkhouse."

Hagarthy slanted him a frowning look. "Suit yourself," he said and went out.

When Hagarthy was gone from the house, John Singleton said, "Go easy on Matt, Ed. He's surly and hard to understand, but he's a good ranch boss. I've yet to find fault with the way he handles his job, and I'd hate to lose him."

Sands nodded, said nothing. He was thinking that Singleton too was a hard one to understand. He would have to start digging elsewhere to find what he had to know. Circle-S's owner wasn't taking him into his confidence. Singleton didn't talk in riddles, but he had developed an annoying habit of skirting the important.

Singleton went on, "As for the squatters, Ed, Matt may be right about them. But be sure they're involved in the rustling before you decide that they should be cleared out."

"Don't worry," said Sands. "I won't go off half-cocked."

"Good. And be careful."

"Careful? Careful of what, John?"

Singleton gave him a surprised look. "You have good nerves," he said. "That bushwhacker's aim was off tonight, but next time he may not miss. You'd better keep him in mind." He opened a desk drawer, took out a rolled paper. "Here's a map of the Pipestem country," he said. "It's accurate. I had a surveyor draw it. No doubt it'll save you a lot of time when you start scouting around."

Sands said, "Thanks," and took the map. He unrolled it, folded it so that it fitted in his pocket. It might be a help, but he would have preferred to have heard some facts stated.

Mrs. Singleton appeared at the doorway and suggested that they come to the living room for coffee. She was attired now in a wine-red dress with a billowy skirt and a form-fitting bodice. It became her; surprisingly, its color did not clash with her auburn hair. Her husband eyed her with a brooding look, then said tonelessly, "We'll be with you in a moment, my dear."

He glanced at Sands. "Any more questions, Ed?"

Sands smiled wryly. "I guess not," he said.

They crossed to the living room. The Chinese servant had just arrived with a laden tray. Claire assumed the role of hostess, pouring the coffee and serving sandwiches. Laurie was still curled up in the chair near the fireplace, gazing moodily at the fire. She stiffened when her father laid a hand on her shoulder and said, "Get over your peeve, daughter. You can see now that Ed is no badman with notches on his gun."

Laurie remained silent. She accepted a cup of coffee from her step-mother with a cold, "Thank you." She didn't look at Sands.

Singleton frowned, moved away, stood by the opposite side of the fireplace. Sands sat on a sofa, listened to Claire Singleton chatter about a party as he ate a sandwich and sipped coffee. It seemed that her husband was giving a party for her, a birthday party, tomorrow evening. "You'll come, won't you, Mr. Sands?" she asked.

"Well . . ."

"We're having people from all over the range."

"Well, if I'm not off riding somewhere tomorrow evening," Sands said. "I'd like to come, of course."

Singleton said, "Be here, Ed." His voice was flat. At the moment it was impossible to tell if it were Laurie who annoyed him or Claire. "Don't get tied up," he added, making an order of it, "until after the party."

Sands said, "All right," and, with even Claire's chatter flagging, he shortly rose and said good night. He was relieved when he left the house, not liking its cross-currents of hatred and distrust.

He crossed to the bunkhouse. There were seven men besides Matt Hagarthy there. Two were lounging in their bunks, one was sewing a patch on a torn shirt, and four were at the long table in the middle of the room playing poker for matches. Sands was the target for seven pairs of eyes, and there was something more than curiosity in their scrutiny. He felt it: hostility.

Matt Hagarthy was at the rear of the room, standing beside a smaller table that, from the papers and inkwell upon it, served him as a desk. The dour-faced ramrod held a tally book and was making a show of studying it. He did not look around.

Sands closed the door, shrugged mentally, moved toward one of the unmade-up bunks. The eyes of the men followed him. He realized abruptly that he had no bedding; the thought came that he should have stayed at the ranchhouse as the Singletons had expected. But he had slept before without blankets, and tomorrow he could get a couple from the house. He set his valise down by the bunk he had chosen. Behind him there was the sound of a hand of cards slapped down upon the table. A bench scraped the floor. Muttering to himself, one of the poker players went to his bunk and began rolling up his bedding. Somebody asked, "Where you going, Chris?"

"Outside," Chris said loudly. "There's a smell in here all of a sudden. I'll bed down on the ground before I bunk with a damn' range detective."

A silence came, stretched taut.

Sands turned and saw that Chris wasn't as eager to sleep outside as he was to start some trouble. Sands saw something more. This cowhand looked a lot like Russ Nolan's bronc-peeler called Tip. He had the same yellow hair, fair complex-

ion, well-formed features. But he was older, heavier, tougher. Tip's brother, sure. His blankets rolled, Chris took his hat, brush jacket and gunbelt down from the nails that served as pegs at the end of his bunk.

One of the men at the table drawled, "Don't blame you, Chris. Can't tell if it's polecat or range detective but it's sure a smell."

Sands removed his hat, coat and gun rig.

He didn't like it, but this wasn't something a man could sidestep. Chris wanted trouble. The others wanted it. And Matt Hagarthy, by keeping silent, was giving his consent to it. Evidently Chris was the fighter among the Circle-S crew, and he was chosen to give Ed Sands a rough welcome to *Snake-in-the-Hole.*

Sands smiled faintly, said, "Why move out, friend? Why not just put me out if my smell bothers you? That is, if you're man enough."

Chris dumped his gear onto his bunk, and there was an eager look in his eyes. He faced Sands, hitched up his levis, demanded, "You think I ain't man enough, eh?"

"That's right, Chris. I think you're all talk."

"I'll show you different, mister."

Sands remained where he was and said, "Well, it's up to you." It was Chris's fight, and he was going to let the man bring it to him. Chris came toward him, moving slowly, his thick shoulders hunched and his head thrust forward. He held his fists at chest level, feinting with them and swaying slightly from side to side. His steps were springy; he was balanced on his toes. Chris must have seen a prizefight somewhere sometime or other, and was imitating the boxers' maneuverings. He got close enough to jab at Sands, feinting with his left and punching with his right.

Sands took a couple light punches to the body to let the man think that it would be easy. Then Chris forgot the prizefight style and swung hard with his left, aiming the blow at Sands' face. Sands ducked, caught the man off balance, hitting him twice alongside the head. Chris grunted under the jolt, and his grin faded along with his confidence. Sands backstepped, seeming to retreat, then stood his ground when Chris rushed. He drove a blow to Chris's belly. The cowhand

stopped in his tracks, doubled over, reeled against the nearby tier of bunks, and hung there gasping.

Sands could have finished it at that moment, but it was important that this fighter among the Circle-S crew should know that he was really whipped. Sands said, "Come on, Chris. You're not quitting already, are you?"

The taunt brought Chris at him, wild with rage. He rushed in a crouch, trying to take Sands about the middle in a bear hug. He was wide open, and Sands battered him about the head. Chris howled with rage and pain, and abruptly threw himself bodily at Sands' legs. Sands leaped aside, but not quickly enough to escape. Chris's shoulder rammed against his knees; he lost his balance and fell against the table. Chris had his chance then but let it slip through his fingers. He rose slowly, sucking air into his lungs through his wide-open mouth. Sweat trickled down his face. His yellow hair hung down over his eyes.

A voice said, "Come on, Chris! Get him – Get him now!"

Sands moved away from the table. There was a movement behind him. A bench, shoved by somebody other than Chris, hit the calves of his legs. He was thrown off balance again, and now Chris came at him. The man's thrust carried Sands backwards over the bench, dropped him on the floor beyond. Chris came after him, trying to drop atop him on his knees. Heaving over, Sands came clear and got to his hands and knees. Chris bounded up, booted Sands in the side once and then again. Sands absorbed the kicks, then flung himself at the man's legs. He got his arms about Chris's thick legs, then reared up and lifted. He spilled Chris over backwards and heard the hard thump of the man's yellow head against the floor. He waited, his chest heaving with his labored breathing, but Chris didn't move. Chris was out cold.

Sands turned to the bench shover, a wiry man with an Indian-dark face. He saw fear crawl into the man's dark eyes. "You," Sands said. "What's your name?"

The man was slow in answering. "Bixler. Pete Bixler."

"Pete, you've got this coming," said Sands, and he struck hard.

The blow caught Pete Bixler on the jaw. He fell against the table, half turned toward it, and it kept him from spilling

to the floor. He clung to the table, stunned. Sands hadn't stopped moving after hitting the man. Back at his bunk, he caught up his gun and faced the Circle-S men in silent challenge. They stared at him in a silence of their own, and with somewhat less hostility. A grizzled oldster chuckled and said, "Put your gun up, Mr. Sands. We're not going to gang up on you." He was leaning from his bunk, an upper one. He was the old man who had come to take Singleton's rig.

Sands gave him a faint smile. "Just some nice, clean sport, eh, Charlie?"

"Well, not exactly."

"No?"

"No crew wants to see a snoop thrown in with them."

Sands nodded. "Granted," he said. "But what's a man to do when a friend with trouble calls on him for help?" He gestured toward the still unconscious Chris. What's his name, Charlie?"

"Harmon. Chris Harmon."

"He's got a brother called Tip?"

"Yeah."

"And Tip works for Russ Nolan."

Charlie nodded. "Come to think of it, he does. You catch on fast, Sands. The Harmon boys are tough customers, but that's not saying they're rustlers. Not Chris, anyway. Chris is all right, just a little too cocky. . . . Or he was until tonight."

A groan came from Chris Harmon. He stirred, heaved up to a sitting position. He held his head in his hands for a moment, then rose slowly and staggered to his bunk. He cleared his gear off it, dumping the stuff onto the floor. He sprawled out on the bunk, face down. Pete Bixler swore under his breath, walked out of the bunkhouse and slammed the door after him. The other hands turned in. Matt Hagarthy was still absorbed in his tally book. Old Charlie gave Sands a friendly wink. Sands put down his gun, sat on the edge of his bunk, took out makings. Later, after he'd had his smoke and the room was dark, a voice muttered, "That too smart son will get himself back-shot, sure."

Sands couldn't tell whose voice it was.

CHAPTER FOUR

SANDS had breakfast with the crew in the cookshack, and except for old Charlie, was ignored by them. They ate and left to tackle the day's work. Chris Harmon's face had a badly battered look, and Pete Bixler's dark face wore a sullen expression. Sands lingered at the table, taking out the map John Singleton had given him. The cook, a big colored man whom the hands called Arch, gave him a friendly grin and said, "Mister, I hear you all got the Injun sign on them cowboys. Yes, sah. Charlie Wall says you done whipped Chris and Pete."

"A tough one, that Chris."

"He sure talks tough sometimes."

"He and Pete partners?"

"Thicker'n thieves, them two," said Arch. "More coffee, sah?"

Sands told him no, studied his map some more, rolled and lighted a smoke. When he finally left the cookshack, the hands had ridden out onto the range. Only Charlie Wall was left behind, and he was at the blacksmith shed over near the barn. The oldtimer was building a fire in the forge when Sands reached the shed.

Sands said, "Circle-S has a line cabin up north, close to Lost Squaw Creek. Anybody up there, Charlie?"

"Yeah. Ben Luray."

"What doing?"

"The cabin's used for a horse camp," Charlie replied. "Ben's an old mustanger, and he's breaking in a bunch of bronco." He took a plug of tobacco from his hip pocket, gnawed off a chew. "Ben works with the bronco daytime. Nights, he keeps his eyes open."

Sands nodded. The map showed that Luray's line cabin was close to the rough country around the Lost Squaw. A badlands. Nolan's place was west of the creek. Luray's keeping his eyes open nights meant that he was keeping watch – or at least had orders to keep watch – so that Russ Nolan and his crowd couldn't raid that part of the Circle-S range. The shortest route to Circle-S from Nolan's badlands ranch was past the line cabin.

"What sort of a man is Ben Luray?" Sands asked.

"Better see for yourself," Charlie Wall said shrewdly.

Sands nodded. "I'll do that. Where can I find a saddle?"

Charlie went to the rear of the shed, returned with a double-cinched saddle. "My rig," he said. "Don't do much riding, so you're welcome to it." He patted the Winchester rifle in the boot. "Better take that with you. A thirty-thirty makes the kind of talk most hombres savvy." He followed Sands out to the corrals, watched him rope and saddle a big dun gelding. He seemed in a communicative as well as a friendly mood, so Sands asked, "Know anything about Russ Nolan?"

"Only what I hear."

"Seem like a rustler to you?"

"Hell, Sands, that's no question to ask a man."

"No? Why not?"

Charlie spat tobacco juice. "Did some rustling in my time," he said. "Only in the old days it was called mavericking. Never knew a cowhand who wasn't willing to put his brand on a few strays if he got the chance. What I mean is, you can't look at a man and say he's a rustler. Maybe Nolan is, maybe he ain't." He spat again and gave Sands a slanted look. "Could be that you're not interested in whether or not he's been stealing Circle-S stock."

Sands gave him a searching look. "What do you mean by that?"

Charlie shrugged. "You're out to get Nolan no matter what, ain't you? Shucks, Sands, I wasn't born yesterday. I'm an old mossyhorn what's seen plenty of queer deals. Sure, I know the boss called Nolan a rustler. But that ain't the real reason for there being bad blood between them. I know that. The whole range knows it."

"All but Ed Sands, Charlie."

"What? You mean. . . ?"

Sands nodded. "I was hired to stop the rustling of Circle-S cattle," he said. "I was told that Russ Nolan is a likely suspect. Beyond that I don't know a thing. Of course, I've got eyes in my head. Russ Nolan is a handsome buckaroo. He could have a way with other men's women — as well as with other men's cattle. Am I guessing right?"

Charlie looked about uneasily, as though afraid he might be overheard. "Ain't for me to talk, I reckon. But – well, you're guessing right, friend."

"A man has got to worry about the company his daughter keeps, eh?"

"Daughter?"

"You talking about somebody other than Laurie Singleton?"

"Damn it, Sands, you're a buzzard when it comes to picking at a man's thoughts," Charlie Wall grumbled. "You know I ain't talking about Laurie. She's friendly with Russ Nolan, but not in the way that would cause Singleton to worry. Hang me for a gossiping woman!"

Sands smiled faintly. "Don't let it bother you," he said. "I've got eyes, and I use them. I just needed to know if anybody else knows any of what I saw. Mrs. Singleton is a mighty attractive woman, Charlie. You sure she gets out of the boss' sight?"

"She rides alone sometimes."

"So?"

"That could mean a lot, or nothing at all."

"You're right, Charlie," said Sands. "I just wanted to know if she had the opportunity. As for Russ Nolan, I'm only concerned about whether or not he's rustling Circle-S stock. If it's something else that Singleton's got against him, I'll keep off his trail. I'll have no part in squaring the rustling of somebody's wife – even a friend's wife."

He mounted the dun, then said, "Doesn't Laurie ride a pinto? I don't see a paint horse in the corrals."

"You're a little too late. Laurie rode out early."

"Early bird, eh? Which way did she ride?"

"North," said Charlie Wall. "Could be she headed for Nolan's place."

The big dun wanted to run, and Sands let it have its head. He headed northwest instead of directly north, going by the surveyor's map rather than by Charlie Wall's vague directions to the line cabin and the Nolan ranch beyond it. There were low hills beyond miles of grass. And scattered over that vast expanse of grass where bunches of white-faced cattle in the

Circle-S iron. Singleton's range took in such a large portion of the Pipestem country that it would have taken a small army to patrol it against rustlers. Sands had noted that when studying his map, but he was far more impressed by Circle-S's size now that he was riding across it. True, he had seen far bigger spreads. Texas had larger, so did Arizona. But here was an abundance of grass and water, and John Singleton could run more cattle to the acre than some of those southwestern ranches could to the square mile.

The horse camp was in an elbow of the sweep of hills and consisted of a log cabin with a lean-to at the rear, a high fenced corral, and a wire-fenced meadow. There were about thirty mustangs in the meadow, and a man was halter-breaking a roan stallion in the corral. A black gelding was staked out between the cabin and the corral in the shade of a clump of trees. A black horse for night riding. Ben Luray seemed to know his business.

Luray stripped the halter off the roan and came from the corral as Sands rode up. He shoved back his hat, wiped sweat off his face. He was a lanky, leathery man of about forty. He eyed Sands without interest. Evidently he was a man who lived alone and liked it and found no pleasure in having a chance visitor. After sizing up Sands, Luray looked at the dun Sands rode. Then he nodded.

"Working for Circle-S," Sands said and gave his name.

Luray nodded again, gave his own name.

Sands hooked his right leg about his saddle-horn, took out makings. A cigarette rolled, he passed his tobacco sack and papers to the bronc-buster. Luray fashioned a smoke, returned the makings. They lighted up, and Luray waited. He volunteered nothing, not even a comment on the weather. And Sands judged that there would be no profit in questioning him. Here was a miser with words.

Sands said finally, "How do I get to Russ Nolan's place from here?"

"Head west," said Luray. "You can't miss it."

"Thanks."

"Rough country, yonder."

"So I heard."

"A man riding a Circle-S mount won't be exactly welcome."

Sands nodded. "I heard that, too," he said. "But I ran into Russ in Rawlins yesterday. He halfway invited me to stop by some time. Thought I'd take him up on it. Know Russ?"

"Everybody knows Russ Nolan," Luray replied.

"Sort of popular, eh?"

"Most folks like him."

Sands nodded again, straightened in the saddle, lifted his reins. "See you again, Luray," he said, and rode on. He didn't know what to make of the man, but was inclined to think that he was all right. It was possible that Luray might be closing his eyes to the activity of the Nolan crowd – if that bunch was raiding Circle-S range. But to Sands it seemed more likely that the man was keeping rustlers off the north end of the spread. A close-mouthed man, Ed Sands knew from experience, was usually a difficult man to deal with – especially when it was a crooked deal.

An hour later Sands broke from the hills and looked out across a stretch of badlands that extended as far as the eye could reach. He sighted the Nolan place a half mile off and aimed toward it. There was still grassland, but also much brush. Farther on the country roughened, turned rocky and barren: wild horse country. It suited Russ Nolan, and there was no doubt that the man, since he claimed to be more interested in horses than in cattle, was a mustanger. Mustanging required the sort of recklessness to be seen in Russ Nolan. He would be good at capturing and breaking wild horses.

Sands saw no riders as he rode slowly toward the ranch headquarters, but he did see a few cattle – a couple hundred head, no more – on the hardscrabble range to the south. Nolan's headquarters consisted of a log cabin, a plank barn, a maze of corrals. About twenty horses were distributed among the corrals. A clearwater stream, a branch of the Lost Squaw, ran past the buildings. A familiar pinto pony stood ground-hitched at the shady side of the barn, and its owner, Laurie Singleton, stood talking to Nolan in front of the building.

They fell silent and watched Sands ride up. The girl was rigged out in men's clothing again, and, like yesterday, her hat hung at her shoulders by its chin strap. Her dark hair was

tousled. She was damn' attractive, Sands reflected, despite the clothes she wore. Her manner was something else: she was frowning, gazing at Sands defiantly. Russ Nolan, big and handsome, was grinning, but there was a bewildered look in his eyes. He was wondering, Sands was sure, why John Singleton's trouble shooter was paying him a visit so soon.

Sands reined in facing the pair, tipped his hat back, folded his hands on the dun's saddle-horn. He smiled at the girl, said, "Good morning. You ride early." He looked at Nolan. "Thought I'd take you up on your invitation, Russ."

"Don't waste any time, do you, Sands?"

"That's not one of my bad habits."

"But spying on people is," the girl broke in. "What's the idea of following me, Sands?"

"Not following you."

"You're lying," Laurie said hotly. "Sands, you —"

Nolan cut in, "He's not lying, honey. When a hombre like Sands says something, you can bet your bottom dollar it's straight as gospel. He came to look over my spread. Your dad told him that I'm behind the rustling of Snake-in-the-Hole stock, and Sands wants to make sure. Your dad made a mistake. He didn't know that Sands is the kind of hombre who does just that — make sure. He wouldn't go along with a frame-up."

"Figure you're a good judge of men, Russ?"

"Good enough, Sands."

"What makes you think I wouldn't go along with a frame-up?"

Nolan shrugged. "You come at a man straight on: in the open, in broad daylight. Not through the brush after dark like a damn' bushwhacker. I peg you for a square shooter."

"Friend, you could be wrong," Sands told him, smiling thinly. "I always play the other man's game. If he plays dirty, I play dirty. As for you, I still haven't figured out your style. That stunt you pulled yesterday was tricky and a little below the belt. But for now I'll keep an open mind about you."

Nolan chuckled. "A plain-spoken cuss, ain't he, Laurie?"

"He's got a way of getting around a person," Laurie said. She eyed Sands warily, not liking him. "Next thing he'll have

you friendly with him – and then you watch out for a punch below the belt."

Sands smiled at her, said to Nolan, "This girl not only dresses like a man, she talks like a man." He sobered, frowned a little. "I can't figure it. Singleton suspects you of rustling his cattle, yet his daughter is friends with you. What goes on, Russ?"

Nolan was still amused. "You're being paid to find out," he said.

Laurie saw no humor in the discussion. "He won't find out," she said bitterly. "He'll never see more than John Singleton wants him to see. Russ, don't play the fool and trust this man."

She turned away abruptly, strode to her horse.

Nolan said, "Sands, don't get that girl wrong. She thinks a lot of her old man, if not of his judgment. And she's loyal. She wouldn't be friends with me if she suspected I was stealing Circle-S cattle."

"I can believe that, Russ."

"But it won't take you off my trail."

"I'm not on your trail yet, friend."

"There's more to this trouble than a stranger could know about."

Sands nodded. 'That could be," he said. "But I catch on fast. I'll be honest with you so we understand each other. Singleton wants your hide nailed to the fence for a reason. That reason is your stealing his cattle – or your trying to steal his wife." He paused, watched Nolan's face darken with sudden anger. "I'm interested in the one, but not the other," he went on. "And I'll give you my word on this, friend: I'll have no part in pulling a frame-up on you if it's the other thing. But don't let me catch you stealing any Circle-S stock."

"Sands," said Russ Nolan, "get the hell out of here."

"Sure," Sands replied, lifting his reins. "Sure, Russ."

He turned his horse away, feeling the man's angry gaze following him.

Sands caught up with Laurie halfway to the hills. She ignored him, although he rode stirrup to stirrup with her, and he held his tongue. She kept her eyes front, giving him

plenty of time to study her. The wind was playing with her hair. Her profile lacked the cameo-sharpness or her stepmother's, but Sands like this less-than-perfection. Her nose had a pert tilt; her jaw line was a bit sharp, but her lips were full. Sands had witnessed her anger already, and he suspected that she could hate well. And if she could hate, she would be able to love with a like capacity. By the time they reached the hills, Laurie was very much aware of his scrutiny and her awareness stained her cheeks with warm color.

She reined in abruptly, gazed at him with sharp annoyance. "All right," she said sharply. "What do you want to ask me?"

"Are you willing to be friends?"

"With you," she said contemptuously, "no."

"Give a little, Laurie. Don't call me 'guilty' without a trial."

"A waste of time, talk."

Sands shook his head. "Not between you and me," he told her. "Look; have I done anything so far that you could hold against me? I've kept quiet about you being that bushwhacker. I've gone easy on your friend, Nolan. All I've done is warned him not to let me catch him rustling Circle-S cattle. Let's put our cards on the table, Laurie. I know there's more to this trouble than your father has told me. He doesn't want to tell me the whole of it. And in that he's a fool. I'll find out in time, little by little." He paused, saw that the girl was now in deep thought. "It's his wife," he went on. "She's the real cause of the trouble. Am I right?"

Laurie gave him an almost startled look. "You're sharp," she said. And then she added suspiciously, "Or maybe Dad did tell you all of it."

"No. I give you my word — no."

"All right. It's Claire."

"She and Nolan are carrying on?"

"No!" Laurie exclaimed. "It's not true. Would I be friendly with Russ if that were true?"

"He could be involved with her without your knowledge."

"No," said Laurie. And again, "No!"

Sands considered that, eying her intently. She meant that.

Laurie was very much in earnest. There was no attempt to cover up for Russ Nolan. He asked, "Who is the man?"

"I don't know," she replied. "At least, I'm not sure. If I were sure, I wouldn't tell you. I don't want to see a man killed. That's why I don't want you here, Sands. I don't want bloodshed. Given time, I'd find away to handle this thing." Her right hand was clenched, and she struck it against her saddle-horn. "It's that woman," she went on bitterly. "She's trouble. If it's not one man, it's another. I'll tell you this much, Sands. She has been playing up to Russ. Every chance she gets, she makes him notice her. If Russ was – well, a no-good, there would be something between them. Just as there's something between her and this other man. Russ is no saint, but he wouldn't take another man's wife."

"I'm beginning to believe that, for reason."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"No man would bother with Claire, even if she threw herself at him, when he could have you."

Laurie looked as though she'd been unexpectedly slapped. "That's a rotten thing to say," she said fiercely. "Talk about being found guilty without a trial! Russ and I are friends. Good friends. That's all, Sands. I'll – I'll kill you if you ever say again that we're anything more!"

"Sorry," he said. "I won't make that mistake again."

"It's just that I've known Russ a long time."

"Sure, Laurie."

"He's fun to be with. He's sort of free and easy."

Sands nodded. "And he'd do most anything for you, with no strings attached," he said. "Like roughing up somebody you don't want around."

Laurie flushed guiltily. "Yes," she admitted. "I asked him to rough you up. I talked him into it. I told him that you'd make trouble for him – for all of us here on Pipestem range. I thought you could be scared off. But you're tough." She spoke grudgingly, admitting this. "You're tougher than I imagined a man could be. And you're smart."

"And you don't like me. You won't be friends."

"I don't like you. I won't be friends."

Sands smiled with his lips. Mentally, he winced. He took out makings, fashioned a cigarette. "I'm not what you think,"

he said, after lighting up. "I'm no gunfighter. I'm a sort of jack-of-all-trades and master of none. I've been most anything a man like myself can be, Laurie."

He paused, puffed on his cigarette, saw that the girl was interested.

"The past couple years I've been working as a trouble-shooter for a railroad, a mining company, and a Panhandle cow outfit," he went on. "Like you say, I'm tough. Maybe I'm smart enough to buck trouble and not get myself hurt. But I'm not a man with a gun for hire – for just any crummy deal." He smiled at her, and his smile was a bit rueful. "A misspent life, mine. I haven't made much of myself. But I have some pride. I give you my word, Laurie, I won't go gunning for any man just to keep some woman's skirts clean."

Laurie didn't say anything.

Sands said, "If we can't be friends, do we have to be enemies?"

"I – I don't know."

"Think about it," he told her, lifting the dun's reins.

He swung away, heading deeper into the hills. He meant to visit the Bench and look over the squatters there. Too, there was marked on his map a spot called Crimp's Place. He intended to visit it. When he glanced back, Laurie was looking after him. Catching his glance, she kneed her pinto and rode on toward Circle-S range. He had her on his mind as he headed on through the hills. And that, he told himself, wasn't good. She wasn't for him.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE hill country west of Circle-S's main range and south of Russ Nolan's badlands ranch was timber and brush mostly. At least for the first several miles. Sands became aware of a roaring as he rode south, and for a time the sound puzzled him. As it grew louder, he realized that it was the thunder of a great volume of gushing water. He came finally to the rim of a narrow gorge, and from it rose the booming roar. Two hundred feet below a raging cataract: water sweeping through a narrow, rocky channel. The water was churned

white, and from it rose a mist that caught the sun and formed myriad little rainbows. Lost Squaw Creek.

Sands could see only a few hundred yards along the gorge, for just south of his position it formed a hairpin bend. There was an illusion of the torrent rushing from the rocks to the north and then vanishing into them again to the south. It was a wild, almost savage spot. The crashing roar followed Sands for a long time after he turned his spooked dun away. Then after another mile he quartered down a slope into a park-like valley; and here, in a broadened channel, the Lost Squaw was, though still a fast-flowing stream, comparatively placid.

This small valley was a part of the Circle-S range called the Bench, but Sands saw no signs of squatters in it. Beyond was another valley, far larger and extending south as far as the eye could reach. The Lost Squaw wound through it, ever widening and now wholly tamed. There were squatter places here: crude plank houses and barns and pens amid tilled fields. At the nearer ones Sands could see people at their chores — men, women, children. Their farms looked no grubbier than most of those started in any cattle country with hope and little else. In fact Sands thought they looked prosperous enough despite having been so recently set up. In time, these squatters might really prosper, at least wrest a livelihood from the soil. That was if they were granted time. Matt Hagarthy, permitted to have his way, wouldn't give the time. It was understandable, Sands reflected. Hagarthy was a cowman, and he could visualize cattle in this valley. To such a man the turning of the sod with a plow was a waste. No, Matt Hagarthy wouldn't give these people time to prosper, not if John Singleton permitted him to have his way.

The squatters had opened a road through the valley, one running close to the creek, and Sands followed it. Far south, a wooden bridge spanned the Lost Squaw, and across it stood a cluster of plank buildings which resembled a tiny crossroads town. The largest of the half-dozen buildings bore a crudely painted sign atop its roofed porch. The sign read: *Crimp's Place*. The porch held an untidy display of store merchandise: reels of barbwire, farm implements, kegs of

nails. The place had two front doors, both wide open. Crossing the bridge, Sands saw a woman standing in the doorway of one of two shacklike houses that faced Crimp's Place at an angle. The woman's gaze was on him in a curious scrutiny.

Another building was a blacksmith's shop, and a farmer was watching the smith shoe a horse. There was a small shed and a fair-sized barn behind the store building, and a teenaged youth in bib-overalls was working with a shovel at the side of the barn. A shaggy dog was worrying some object on the ground by the hole being dug. The boy took a swipe at the dog with his shovel, and the animal scampered away with its ears back and its tail between its legs. A horse and buggy stood in front of the store building; it caught Sand's attention, but only for an instant. He quickly swung his gaze back to the youth with the shovel, then turned his horse toward the barn.

The boy rested his shovel, stared at Sands. The dog returned, again worried the object on the ground. It was the object that, more than anything else here, interested Sands. It was a green cow hide, clumsily rolled. He reined in, looked at the hide and at the hole being dug, then shifted his gaze to the boy: a gawky kid, not too bright looking. His eyes were too large for his skinny face. There was a scared look in them.

Sands said, "All right, son, let's have a look at it."

The boy looked as though he wanted to run.

Sands said, his tone harsh now, "Spread it out."

The boy took another swipe at the dog, driving it off, then dropped the shovel. He climbed from the hole, unrolled the hide. The brand was easily read; it was just what Sands had expected: a Circle-S.

"Who told you to bury it, son?"

"Mister Crimp."

"You work for him?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Andy. Andy Bryce," the boy said edgily. He'd noted the brand on this stranger's horse; awareness that it matched the brand on the hide put fear in him. "I live across the valley

with my folks," he explained. "I just do chores for Mister Crimp."

Sands nodded. "Any more Circle-S cattle around here, Andy?"

Andy shook his head, said, "No, sir. Leastways, this is the only one I saw. We butchered it a couple days ago. I guess it was all right. Mister Crimp always eats Snake-in-the-Hole beef. Reckon he buys the steers from that outfit."

"Snake-in-the-Hole?" Sands said. "Everybody around here call Circle-S by that name?"

"Well . . . mostly."

"Why?"

Andy's face took on a puzzled look. "I don't rightly know," he said. "I guess it's because it's a rich man's outfit and nobody likes a rich man. Bench folks are always expecting trouble with that outfit. We're squatters, mister, and I guess we're all scared we'll be moved out one of these days. And that's why we call it Snake-in-the-Hole." He glanced at the brand on the hide. "It kind of looks like a snake in a hole, don't it, mister?"

"Yeah," said Sands. "I guess it does."

He turned away, rode back to the front of Crimp's Place. Two men had come from the store and were about to climb into the buggy. One was fat Able Clayton, head of the Rawlins Development Company, and the other was the dapper man Sands had seen in Clayton's company yesterday in Rawlins.

Clayton's flabby face creased with a broad smile, his voice boomed, "Ah, Mr. Sands! So we meet again!" His tan suit looked as though he'd slept in it last night. His straw hat looked more limp and shapeless than yesterday. He used it to fan his face which was damp with sweat. His bald head was shiny in the sunlight and unwholesomely pale. His smile held, seeming as false as a counterfeit coin to Ed Sands. Clayton added, "You don't waste any time in getting about, Mr. Sands."

Sands said, "Not when I've a job to do," and gave the fat man's companion a curious look. Clayton noticed that and said, "Mr. Henderson, Mr. Sands. Mr. Stace Henderson, sir. He is associated with me in a business way."

Sands nodded, said, "How are you, Henderson?"

Henderson smiled, acknowledging the introduction. His appearance shamed Able Clayton. He was neat, almost sleek. He looked as though he had visited a barber shop that morning; he was freshly shaven, his mustache closely trimmed. He was a man of about forty, Sands judged; he was typically a townsman, perhaps a big-city man. He lacked Clayton's friendliness, but said civilly, "I understand that you work for John Singleton, Sands."

"That's right. I do."

"Clayton tells me you have great influence with Singleton."

"Clayton could be wrong," Sands said.

The fat man wiggled a finger at him. "Don't be modest, Mr. Sands," he said chidingly. "I've often heard John speak of you. He thinks a great deal of you, my friend, and I'm sure you have his confidence."

Sands smiled faintly. This soft soap was leading up to something. This pair wanted something of him, and they were buttering him up with fancy talk. He watched Able Clayton give the younger man a prodding look.

Henderson said, "I'm a businessman, Sands, and it's not my custom to beat about the bush. I'm interested in investing in land. I represent a group of Chicago bankers who plan to go into the cattle business." He smiled, his manner amiable now rather than merely civil. "I'm speaking in confidence, and I'm sure you'll let this go no farther. Clayton has convinced me that the Bench would make ideal cattle. He assures me that Singleton has no use for it. However, Singleton has refused Clayton's offer to buy it."

"So?" Sands prompted.

"I feel that your employer is something of a philanthropist," said Henderson. "He doesn't want the squatters ejected from this part of his range."

"Have you told him that you want the Bench, and why?"

"That wouldn't be good business, Sands."

"Why not?"

"It might cause him to ask a higher price, should he decide to sell, if he knew that Clayton has a buyer. That, more exactly, Clayton is acting as my agent. If Singleton could be

influenced into selling to Clayton without knowing . . ." Henderson smiled again. "You understand, Sands?"

"Not why you're taking me into your confidence."

"That's easily explained. I hoped you might help the thing along."

"How could I help?"

"By using your influence with Mr. Singleton."

Sands eyed him with genuine curiosity.

Able Clayton said, "What Mr. Henderson means, Sands, is that you could easily convince Singleton that the squatters are rustling Circle-S cattle. That is his greatest concern at the moment: rustling. If it were proved that the squatters were thieves . . . Well, he would probably be happy to sell the Bench and have people cleared out. Eh, Sands?"

"You've got it figured out," Sands said.

"And you'll consider it, eh?"

Sands was still smiling, and his smile masked the contempt he felt for the fat man. "I'll think about it, sure," he said.

"Good," said Stace Henderson. "There'll be a thousand dollars in it for you the day the property is signed over to Clayton."

Clayton said, "A thousand dollars, Sands," and beamed hugely.

Sands had heard it said more than once that every man had his price. Evidently Able Clayton and Stace Henderson believed such a thing. As they drove off they seemed quite satisfied that they had bought Ed Sands. Sands watched the rig cross the bridge and take a road that led east across the valley. Then, with a shrug, he put them from his thoughts for the time being. He dismounted, stepped onto the porch of the building, and became aware of a man lounging in a doorway. His impression was that here was another fat man. Then he saw that this man had none of Able Clayton's flabbiness, but a bulkiness that was firm brawn. He was as thick as Clayton, but solidly thick. His hair was rust red, cut short so that it resembled a bristly brush. His shirt was half open, revealing a red mat upon his chest. His feet were in carpet slippers. His eyes were heavy lidded beneath red brows and

were sleepy looking. Lounging there against the door-jamb, he was a study in laziness.

"Crimp?" Sands asked.

"Yeah."

"Sands. I work for Circle-S."

"So I heard," Crimp drawled and managed to straighten. "Come in. Have a drink."

Sands followed him into a barroom. To his left was a wide doorway opening into the store part, and he had a glimpse of a faded blonde woman there getting an order for some customer. She moved to and fro, depositing merchandise on a counter with a lack of energy that matched Crimp's indolence. Crimp went behind the bar. There was a display of bottles on the back-bar, but the fat man tapped a keg. He set two filled glasses on the bar.

"Always glad to see Circle-S hands, Sands."

"They come here?"

"Saturdays nights, Sundays. It's closer than Rawlins."

"Get the squatters, too?"

Crimp nodded. "I get their trade in the store," he said. "Dirt farmers ain't much for drinking – or other sport. Cowhands now, they're free and easy. Got no wives and kids to hold them down. Looser with their money. I get some others besides Snake-in-the-Hole hands. Riders from a couple spreads to the south of the Bench. Russ Nolan and his crowd stop by pretty often. They all like it at Crimp's Place. I keep my prices right and the gambling straight. No need for a man to ride to Rawlins. Any time you feel thirsty, lucky, or lonely, friend, come to Crimp's."

"I'll do that."

"Matt Hagarthy comes around once in a while."

"Yeah? Clayton and Henderson too, eh?"

Crimp grimaced. "Clayton's too old for any sporting. And too tight. Henderson is too damn' finicky for a place like this. That pair is after the Bench, like they told you. Always snooping around. Me, I hope Singleton won't sell to them. Well, drink up."

"Before I drink your whiskey," Sands said, "I want to ask you a question. You got a bill-of-sale for that Cirscle-S beef you butchered a day or two ago?"

Crimp gave a violent start.

His lazy, friendly look fell away like a discarded mask.

Crimp placed his big hands flat on the bar. His face darkened with a rush of blood. His voice thickened with his quick anger. "Sands, Circle-S riders have come to my place ever since I opened it nine months ago. I've treated them more like friends than customers. Not a one of them – not even Matt Hagarthy – ever made out that I was a thief."

Sands nodded. "Like you said, Crimp, they come here for some sport. I'm here on business. I've a hunch you knew I was coming on business, and that's why you told the kid to bury that hide. You got a bill of sale?"

"My word's as good as any scrap of paper."

"Not to me, friend."

Crimp's eyes were beady, ugly. "Yeah," he said. "I heard you were coming, and you're just the kind of noisy son I heard you were." He lifted his voice. "Kate, fetch that bill of sale for the Snake-in-the-Hole steer I butchered. Show it to this damn' snoop."

Sands stepped back from the bar, not taking his gaze off the fat man. It was possible that there was a bill of sale, but he decided that this hard cased merchant was too riled up over the doubt cast upon his honesty to the guiltless. He found it hard to believe that such a man would be buying beef from its owner when this back country must see plenty of stolen Circle-S stock. Too, the hide was the give-away. There was no need to bury a hide, since a hide was worth money if it came off a cow properly bought and paid for. Sands heard the woman called Kate come into the barroom, her steps sharp and quick now.

She halted off to Sands's left, and said, "Here it is, Mr. Sands."

Sands glanced at her.

There was a revolver in her hand, not a paper.

Sands swore, grabbed for his gun, turned back toward Crimp. He got his Colt out before Crimp, with murder in his eyes, cleared the bar with the shotgun he'd pulled from beneath it. He fired as the .45 cleared its holster, then, as Crimp cried out and reeled against the back-bar, he whirled toward the woman.

Her short-barreled gun seemed to explode in his face. But he'd ruined her aim with his quick movements, and the slug missed him by a scant inch or two. He slammed against her before she could fire again, and she dropped the gun and clawed at him. He felt her nails rip at his cheek and throat, then he shoved her violently. She cried out as she fell, a wild shriek of fury. Sands glanced at Crimp, saw that the man had dropped his shotgun and was sagged against the back-bar. Crimp was holding his left hand to his right upper arm. Blood stained his fingers. Holstering his gun, Sands turned to the woman again. She had retrieved her gun, and now rose with it pointed at him.

Her faded blonde hair was wildly tousled, and her lips were drawn back to bare her teeth. He knocked the gun aside, caught her about the waist. She tried to break away, lost her balance and pulled Sands with her as she fell against a table and some chairs. They went down together, and for Ed Sands it was like having a hold on a wild cat.

She let go of the gun again, used her hands to strike and claw at him. He had to marvel at her strength. He'd never had a woman fight him before, and so her fury took him by surprise. He managed finally to get a grip on her arms, and to pin her against the floor. She went limp and Sands, still holding her wrists, lifted her to her feet as he rose. He swung her around so that she was in a line with Crimp and released her. She reeled away from him, then faced about and, her wildness not yet spent, glared at him. She looked as though she would attack him again.

He waited.

She suddenly broke into laughter, laughter so loud and so off key that it knifed into Sands. Then her hysteria passed and her fury was gone. She fixed her hands and tried to do something about the wild disorder of her hair. She said huskily, "All right, Sands. You win. You won't have any more trouble with me." She moved to the bar, leaned against it. Satisfied with her hair, she began to smooth her rumpled gingham dress. She was obvious about it, her hands smoothing the dress over her hips with so much care that it seemed she wanted to keep his eyes on her. She was smiling

now. That Crimp had a bullet hole in his arm seemed to concern her not at all.

Sands watched her hands at their smoothing for a moment, then looked at Crimp. "Friend, you don't try to kill a man over a single stolen steer," he said flatly. "What's behind it?"

He expected no answer and so wasn't disappointed.

Crimp looked sick. His wound was still bleeding, and no doubt he was in pain. His color was bad.

Sands went on, "You've got something bigger than a stolen beef to hide. Something so big you'd kill a man rather than have him find out about it. Maybe it would pay you to talk, Crimp."

Still Crimp said nothing.

"Sure, keep clammed up," Sands told him. "Let me find things out for myself. I'll do that, friend. I'll find out. And if I find out that you're in on the rustling of Circle-S cattle, you'd better be gone from here – because I'll burn this place from over your head."

Crimp moved now, along the bar to the doorway to a back room. He kicked the door shut behind him. Sands frowned, turned to leave. The woman said, "Sands."

He faced her. "Yes, Kate?"

"Crimp came by that steer honest."

"Yeah?"

"I give you my word" .

"Then why did he pull such a crazy stunt and risk getting killed?" .

Kate shrugged. "I don't know why," she said, "except that he scares easy. Scare a friendly dog, and it'll bite. Big though he is, Crimp can't stand pain and he was afraid you'd rough him up. Whenever anybody gets tough with him, he gives me a sign and I come with my gun." She smiled wryly. "It usually works, a gun in a woman's hand. But you don't bluff, do you?"

"I didn't recognize the bluff."

"We just wanted to get the drop on you."

"You maybe," said Sands. "Not your man. He had murder in his eyes when he pulled that shotgun. Maybe you don't know why he wanted to kill me, maybe you do."

"I don't," Kate replied. "I don't think he meant to shoot."

"All right. How'd he come by that steer honest?"

"Whenever we need fresh meat, Crimp drops a hint to Matt Hagarthy. The next day he hitches up a wagon and drives over to the hills close to Snake-in-the-Hole, and comes back with a steer tied to the tailgate of his rig."

"Why should Hagarthy supply him with beef?"

"What Hagarthy gets here is always on the house."

Sands nodded. It could be as the woman said. Or she could be lying to cover up for Crimp. The fact remained that the fat man had meant to shoot him. He saw that Kate was watching him intently, her eyes bright and alive. Sands wondered how true she was to Crimp.

"Watch yourself, anyway, Sands," she said. "You've hurt Crimp, and he never forgives anybody who causes him pain."

"A warning? Why the change of heart?"

"You're all right, Sands."

He was surprised and showed it. "I can't figure you."

Kate shrugged. "I'm married to him," she said. "He is what he is, and I'm his wife. Still, I know a good man when I see one. If I want to give you a friendly warning, that's my business. When I say 'watch yourself,' I'm not just warning you against Crimp himself. He's got a lot of friends, Sands, and I think those friends don't have any love for you."

"Keep talking, Kate."

"I've said enough."

"Because you're Crimp's wife?"

She shrugged. "I can forget I'm his wife," she said. "But I've given you a warning, and I don't owe you even that." She gave him a twisted smile that could have meant anything. "Maybe I owe more to some of those friends of Crimp's who might even his score with you."

"Friends like Matt Hagarthy, for example?"

"Matt's a good man, Sands. Maybe a better man than you."

Sands gave her a searching look. "Matt, is it? Not Hagarthy, but Matt?" he said and saw color suddenly stain her pale cheeks. She had a certain faded beauty. A man could do worse, he reflected. "I'll watch out – for Matt especially," he told her. "As for Crimp, you'd better do something to ease his pain. And you'd better warn him to clear out of here if he

is mixed up in the rustling of Circle-S stock. I wouldn't like to see you lose your man."

Kate laughed.

Sands didn't know what her laughter meant. He puzzled over it as he left the place and mounted his horse. The blacksmith and the sod-buster were staring his way from the shed. The shooting inside had made them curious, but none of these people thought enough of Crimp to have hurried to see if he needed help. Crimp might have friends, Sands reflected, but not near at hand.

He crossed the bridge, followed the road taken earlier by Clayton and Henderson. He looked back after a quarter of a mile and saw a pair of riders turn onto the bridge from the north road. He glanced back a few minutes later and was not surprised to see the two coming after him. Some of Crimp's friends, no doubt. They'd seen the fat man, talked it over with him, and now perhaps, out of friendship, had some notion of evening the score for him.

Sands lifted his dun to a lope, aiming for the hills now little more than a mile away. They were timbered hills, and a man could certainly lose his pursuers in such country. But Sands didn't want to shake off the pair on his trail. He was curious about them; it was time, he decided, to become acquainted with some of Crimp's friends. When the road curved around a rocky bluff and hid him from the two riders, Sands swung from it and took to a brushy, timbered slope. Midway upslope, he dismounted and pulled Charlie Wall's Winchester from its scabbard. He levered a cartridge into the rifle's firing chamber, then watched the riders come around the rocky bluff. The pair reined in abruptly, seeing the road ahead empty, and grabbed for their guns. Sands surprise matched theirs, for he recognized them now.

They were Russ Nolan's men, one the young tough called Tip.

Sands watched the pair below and saw their mounting confusion. The anger that came was for himself. He'd no one else to blame for his being deceived by Russ Nolan. That Nolan had played him for a fool seemed certain. It wasn't likely that Tip Harmon and his partner were on Sands' trail without Nolan's knowledge. They weren't without orders

that had to do with the guns they'd drawn and were so damned eager to use. Sands' anger was in his voice as he yelled, "If it's me you're after, come and get me!" He cursed them and fired a shot over their heads.

Tip shouted, "Up there, Blackie!" and fired a couple of wild shots into the timber. The range was long for a six-gun, and his aim was off. Tip's wild nature blinded him to the fact that he was an easy target for Sands' rifle, but Blackie, more sensible, yelled something about getting out of there and swung his horse away. Blackie fled back along the road to safety beyond the bluff, while Tip's horse, spooked by the gunfire, began to act up and kept its rider from doing any more shooting. Sands had the youth in his sights, and his finger began to put pressure on the .30-30's trigger. Then he thought, *The hell with it.* It was too much like shooting a man in cold blood.

As Sands hesitated, Tip Harmon brought his mount under control and also curbed his own reckless spirit. With a frightened glance at Sands, Tip took off back along the road. Both men were now hidden from Sands' sight, but he was sure that they had gone no farther than beyond the bluff. They were waiting for him to ride down from the screening timber so that they could catch him in the open.

He waited a few minutes, then mounted and rode on upslope through the timber. He went deeper into the hills, pausing once for some minutes without seeing or hearing the pair on his trail. Heading for Circle-S range, he was sure that they weren't following him. Yet he felt jumpy, on edge. Two attempts on a man's life in one day played hell with the nerves.

CHAPTER SIX

AN hour later he rode along a ridge from which he could see Circle-S headquarters about five miles to the northeast. Across the vast sweep of range were scattered bunches of cattle, red specks against the green blanket of grass. Directly below him, presently, he spied some sort of building in a hollow. A movement down there caught his eye, caused him to rein in. There was a small stream winding through the

hollow, with cottonwoods and willows fringing it. The trees were old, old like the building. Sands saw now that it was a log cabin, the roof gone and its walls rotting away.

He studied the place for several minutes without seeing anything moving. It was a still day, and not even the foliage stirred. He began to suspect that there'd been no movement, that his eyes had played a trick on him. He took the map from his pocket, studied it a moment. The spot below was marked as "Old Homestead." That told him nothing at all. As he put away the map, he saw something move; and this time his eyes were not deceiving him. There was a horse below among the trees – a saddled horse.

Any small thing could have meaning on this range, Sands knew. His curiosity aroused, he turned his mount down from the crest of the ridge. His descent was an angling one due to the steepness of the slope, but he aimed for the hollow. He reached it behind the ancient cabin, then circled the rotting building and saw the grazing horse. A sorrel rigged with a side-saddle. Its owner was lying on the grass in the sunlight dappled by the trees. It was Claire Singleton.

Sands reined in, dismounted, took out makings. He fashioned his cigarette, his eyes on the woman. She didn't move, didn't look around. She seemed asleep. But then he heard, "Don't be bashful, Sands." Her voice was husky. There was a little amusement in it.

He lighted up, moved toward her, looked down at her. "You could have been mistaken," he said.

"No," she said. "I saw you up on the ridge."

"You have sharp eyes."

"I can see a man long way off if I'm interested."

"And you're interested in me?"

She laughed softly, stirred now. She seemed to squirm as she stretched indolently. She wore a stylish riding habit of tan whipcord, calfskin boots, but no hat. Her hair was copper-bright where the dappled sunlight touched it. She sighed, sat up, smiled at him.

"Come down here, Sands," she said. "I want to talk."

He lowered himself, hunkered down cowhand fashion. "A lonely place," he told her. "I wouldn't have taken you for a person with a liking for lonely places."

"You shouldn't form an opinion of me," Claire replied. "I'm not easily understood, even by myself." She was watching him obliquely; she seemed to be measuring and weighing him. "Sands, what did my husband bring you here for?" she asked abruptly.

"To stop the rustling of Circle-S stock."

"And what else?"

"He didn't say."

"But you suspect there is something more?"

Sands shrugged, did not reply to that. "I had a long ride today," he said. "Scouting Pipestem range. I met a few people, none of them very friendly. I'm beginning to think that your husband is right about this rustling business. What do you think of Russ Nolan, Mrs. Singleton?"

Her eyes lost their sleepy look, widened. "Russ?" she said. "Oh, I wouldn't know a rustler if I saw one. But I don't think Russ is the man you should look for." It was obvious that she didn't want to talk about Nolan, for she asked, "Whom else did you meet?"

"Quite a few people at Crimp's Place."

"I've heard of Crimp's, but I've never seen it."

"You haven't missed much."

"Are you sure?" Claire said, smiling. "I hear gossip that it's a pretty wild place. I've heard that men from all around go there to have themselves a time." She looked straight at him. "Any women in your life, Sands?"

"At the moment, no."

"But . . . ?"

"I've left none behind who were important to me."

"Would you forget me, Sands?"

"That's a crazy thing to ask a man."

"Would you?"

"I won't forget that you're John Singleton's wife."

"You might," she said, and lay back on the grass again. "You just might. With a little encouragement." She fell silent, her lips parted and her eyes half closed. After a time she added, "Let's be friends, you and I."

"A man could get himself killed by being friends with another man's wife."

"Are you afraid of my husband?"

"It's not that. He's my friend and my boss."

"Did you ever kill a man, Sands?"

He gave a start. Her blunt questions kept catching him off guard. "Do you want a man killed, Mrs. Singleton?" he asked.

"Maybe."

"Does your husband know it?"

"How does a person know what someone else knows?"

"If you need a man killed, your husband is the man to do the killing," Sands told her. "Maybe there is more happening around here than rustling. Who is the man you want killed?"

She laughed. "Don't take me so seriously," she said chidingly. "Don't be so grim. You know, I think you and I are going to be friends. I like you, Sands. Somehow you're different from other men. In what way, I don't know. But I'll find out. I'll find out what makes you tick and then . . . Well, maybe you'll do something for me."

"You're very sure of yourself."

"And of men," she told him. "I know men so very well. So well that I ought to hate them all. But I don't, Sands. I don't hate them." She was silent again for a moment, a secretive sort of smile on her lips. "Maybe it's because they're all different, no two alike. You for example. You're not like my husband. You're not like Russ Nolan, or Matt Hagarthy, or any man I could name. Those women who weren't important to you may have found you important to them, Sands."

"I doubt it. Honkatonk women."

"All women are honkatonk women at heart, at least part of the time. And all honkatonk women are sometimes ladies deep inside."

"I don't savvy you, Mrs. Singleton."

"I told you not to form an opinion of me."

Sands nodded. "I'll follow your advice," he told her. "Yesterday in town I asked you a couple of questions. Do you want to answer them now?"

"I'll answer them," she said. "I didn't tell my husband that you were having trouble with Russ Nolan and his crowd because I knew that it would upset him. He hates Russ. And I didn't tell Russ that you were arriving in Rawlins yesterday. Those were your questions. Are they answered?"

"I suppose so," said Sands, and he tossed his cigarette butt

into the creek. "I'll be going," he added, rising. "Shall I help you mount, or are you waiting here for somebody?"

"You may help me mount. I'm not waiting for anybody."

He gave her his hand, helped her to her feet, walked with her to her sorrel mare. He helped her to the saddle, stepped back. They'd had a talk, but he had learned nothing about her except that she was a woman free and easy of manner. And that she thought she wanted a man killed, and would like Ed Sands to do the killing. She wasn't yet sure, but she was laying the groundwork for when she made up her mind. She had felt him out, and she seemed satisfied with the result. A carelessly veiled promise was supposed to have made him her man.

"Suppose your husband asks if I saw you out here?" he said. "What am I to tell him?"

"You're a man of experience, aren't you?"

"What does that mean?"

"It means that you should know how to be discreet," she said. She turned her horse away.

Sands looked after her until she was far out across the range, a puzzled expression in his eyes. "I'll be damned," he muttered finally, and went to catch up his horse.

It was not a serious wound. The bullet hole was a clean one through the flesh of Crimp's upper arm. There had been a great deal of blood, but now the bleeding was stopped, and Kate, ignoring her man's whimpering, cleansed the wound with carbolic solution and bandaged it. She worked swiftly, without flinching at the sight of spilled blood and torn flesh, and finally said, "Not too bad. It could have been a lot worse. That Sands could have shot you through the heart."

"God, woman, the pain's killing me."

"Oh, you'll live."

"A lot of sympathy a man gets around here."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Will," Kate said wearily.

She left the kitchen, returned with a tin cup brim full of whiskey, and said, "Drink that. It'll deaden the pain." Her manner was a little contemptuous of this man who was her husband. For all the size of him, he was like a small boy when in pain. He could magnify that pain in his imagination until

he was in unreasonable torment. She knew him to be shrewd, devilishly cunning on occasion, but somehow his mind was warped in this one particular. A slight cut, a trifling burn, a bit of a bump — and Crimp was tortured. Often, in Kate's eyes, he was a hulking brute. It was difficult for her to understand the ease with which he suffered. She watched him gulp down some of the whiskey.

"Why did you want to kill him?" she asked suddenly.

"Who said I wanted to kill him?"

"He did."

Crimp snorted. "A guess," he said, but his eyes avoided her direct gaze and that to Kate was significant. "I just didn't want him jumping me about that damn' Snake-in-the-Hole steer. I figured I'd get the drop on him and make him clear out. It worked before on others."

"Did Hagarthy put you up to killing him?"

"Now, listen — "

"Or was it Clayton and Henderson?" Kate demanded, not giving him a chance to answer, not really caring what his answer might be. She knew that he wouldn't tell her the truth, knew too that in time she would learn the truth. Kate was in no hurry. "You had a nice long talk with that pair. You watch yourself, Will. Those two sharpers will take your shirt; you trust them too far."

Crimp squirmed. He couldn't stand pain, and he couldn't stand a woman's nagging. He took another long drink, then tilted his red head to one side and listened intently. "Riders," he said. "That's Tip Harmon and Blackie Kearns." He looked hopeful. "Maybe they got Sands. Go see."

Kate said, "All right, all right," but cleaned up the mess left by her crude doctoring before going to the barroom which the two men had entered. She saw nothing on Blackie Kearns' dour face, but Tip's showed a bad humor. She said, "You didn't get him?" She knew they hadn't succeeded in catching up with Sands, or at least in gunning him down, and the knowledge gave her a pleasure she didn't wholly understand. All Kate Crimp knew was that she was glad that Sands wasn't dead. She was smiling as she served the pair drinks.

"What happened?" she asked. "Crimp wants to know."

Tip reached for his drink, not answering.

Blackie said, with a wry smile, "He was too smart for us. He had us beaded, but let us ride back. Why? Don't ask me. He could have downed us, but he just didn't."

"Like he didn't kill Crimp when he had the chance," said Kate.

"A soft streak in him, maybe."

"I doubt it, Blackie. That man's hard clear through."

Tip still didn't say anything, brooding darkly.

Kate went back to the kitchen and saw her husband's disappointment when she told him that the pair hadn't killed Sands. He emptied his tin cup, slammed it down on the table. "Get me paper and pencil," he said. "Tell the kid to saddle a mount for a ride to Rawlins."

She did as he ordered. Then as he laboriously wrote his message she watched over his shoulder. He'd written: *Nath Tobias, Hays City, Kansas — Have business deal for you. Need experienced man in hurry. Will Crimp.* A frightened look came into Kate's eyes as she read the message.

"Nath Tobias," she said thickly. "That's Bucky Hogan!"

"Don't mention that name, damn it!"

"Don't you do it, Will."

"Don't do what?"

"Send that," she said almost fiercely. "You'll be in real trouble if you bring a gunman into this country. If he tries to bushwhack Sands, Sands will come after you. And next time he won't just shoot you through the arm."

He scowled at her. "You worried about me or Sands?" he asked. "Maybe you got some notions about him when he was wrestling you around on the floor. Keep out of my business. There's something big developing around these parts, something you don't know about. And Sands ain't going to spoil it for me." He was growing excited, and his voice rose to a near shout. "Sands!" he raged. "Why'd Singleton have to bring him here?"

Andy came timidly into the kitchen. Crimp thrust the paper at him, then, using his left hand for all this, dug a couple of crumpled dollar bills from his pocket. "Take that message to the depot at Rawlins," he growled. "Give it to the telegraph operator. Tell him to put it on the wire right away. And if you meet that Sands on the way, keep your mouth shut."

The boy said, "Yes, sir," and ducked out of the kitchen.

Kate glared at Crimp. "You fool," she said bitterly. "You fool!"

Big Arch, the crew's cook, was helping the Chinese house servant decorate the ranchhouse veranda with Chinese lanterns for the party. So Sands went to the cookshack and rustled up his own grub. After eating he crossed to the house, found John Singleton in his office. The owner of Circle-S sat at his desk, with some account books open in front of him. He said, "Come in, Ed, come in," and leaned back in his chair. "Have you something to report?"

Sands closed the door, pulled a chair away from the wall, straddled it, folded his arms across the back. "Maybe it's not enough to report," he said dryly. "Two attempts were made on my life today."

"Lord, Ed! You really mean that?"

"I'm not joking, John."

Singleton looked shaken. "Who, Ed?"

"Crimp, for one."

"Crimp? But why?"

"A matter of a steer hide showing a Circle-S brand."

Singleton swore softly. "It could be," he said. "The whole Bench could be mixed up in the rustling. And Crimp . . . Well, a store- and saloonkeeper usually rates as head man in any squatter group. Those farmers are no doubt carried on Crimp's books, and he'd see to it that they'd cut him in on any rustling they might be doing."

"I had a talk with Crimp's wife after I pulled his fangs," Sands said. "She claims that Matt Hagarthy keeps Crimp supplied with beef."

"She's lying. Matt's not the sort who'd hide his own outfit in the back. Ed, never take a woman's word for anything."

"I won't."

"That Crimp's as much a squatter as those farmers. He's one man I should have moved out before he got seeded right."

"He'll go," Sands said. "He'll go fast if I get anything more on him. I warned him I'd burn him out if I caught him rustling Circle-S cattle."

"You said two attempts on your life."

"Yeah. This may interest you more," said Sands. "After I left Crimp's place, a couple riders picked up my trail. A thirty-thirty slug scared them off. A couple of Russ Nolan's riders."

Singleton looked up sharply from lighting a cigar, and a satisfied smile twisted his lips. He was interested in that all right, in anything that concerned Russ Nolan. Crimp he could dismiss lightly enough; Crimp he could leave entirely to Ed Sands. But Russ Nolan was, Sands reflected, a horse of another color. Sands didn't like that satisfied smile.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Singleton said. "This looks as though I wasn't wrong in suspecting Nolan. His sending those men after you proves that he's scared, and that he's scared proves his guilt."

"Maybe."

"Maybe? Do you have any doubts?"

"I've got my own suspicions of Nolan now. But no proof. We still have no evidence of his rustling."

"Well, get it, Ed. Get it and don't lose any time."

"We can be in a hurry," Sands said, "but Nolan may not accommodate us. If he's our man, you can count on it that he'll not steal any cattle for a while. He's not going to hand us our evidence, John." He took out makings and fashioned a cigarette. "On how large a scale is this rustling, John?"

Singleton gestured toward the account books open on his desk. "The story is all here," he said. "Circle-S Ranch is in none too good financial shape, and rustling is partly to blame. It's large scale, Ed, but I can't give you any figures. Any sort of loss hurts. Cattle prices are low, have been for several years, and if we have fewer cattle to ship to market — well, it hurts. My expenses are high, my personal expenses." He smiled faintly. "I guess I'm no longer a tight-fisted cowman, Ed."

Sands nodded. He understood. A man made money, took a trip to the big city, met a woman — an expensive woman. Yes, John Singleton's personal expenses were probably his wife's extravagances. Sands lighted his cigarette and said, "By the way, I ran into Able Clayton at Crimp's Place. He was with a man named Henderson."

Singleton eyed him curiously.

Sands went on, "They took me into their confidence. Since

I didn't ask for it, I'm not obligated to keep it. It seems that Henderson reps for some Chicago money interests who want to invest in the cattle business. Clayton has convinced him that the Bench would make a good cattle range. That fat man is acting as Henderson's agent, the idea being that you may sell the Bench for a lower price if you don't know why Clayton wants to buy it." He chuckled. "Now you do know, John."

"It sounds fishy to me. Why'd they take you into their confidence?"

"I'm supposed to have some influence with you. I'm to convince you that the Bench squatters are rustlers so you'll be eager to sell to Clayton. If I convince you, I rate a thousand dollars of Mr. Henderson's money."

"It still doesn't ring true, Ed."

"It could have worked," said Sands. "If I had liked the smell of double-cross money." He rose, waited, but Singleton was lost in thought. He added, "I'll stick with it. A few more days, and I may have something definite to report."

He thought, leaving the room, *If they don't get me on the third try.*

Laurie was on the veranda steps watching the two men at the chore of hanging the Chinese lanterns. She stood with her feet wide apart, her hands deep in the pockets of her levis, her manner resentful. She ignored Sands until he stopped beside her, then gave him a frowning look. "Have a nice ride, friend?" she asked, and put a something nasty into the "friend."

"I didn't get bored."

"Oh?"

"A lot of interesting people on Tipestem range."

"How right you are," said Laurie and [illegible] curious. "Just what interesting people did you meet, Sands?"

"None half so interesting as you."

"That I don't believe. I'm pretty dull."

"Not to me," Sands said. "Will I see you at the shindig tonight?"

Laurie shrugged. "If you look hard enough for me," she replied, bitterness creeping into her voice. "I'll put in an appearance — for appearances' sake. For Dad's sake, not for hers.

It wouldn't do for me to do what I want to do — ride off somewhere. It wouldn't do to let everybody see that I don't get on with my step-mother, would it?"

Sands said, "That would be a little girl stunt, Laurie," and went on down the steps and across the ranchyard, angling toward the corral where Matt Hagarthy was off-saddling his horse. The ranch boss gave him a flat look, said nothing until he'd turned the horse into the pen. Then his tone was a challenge, "Well, what's on your mind?"

"I stopped by Crimp's Place today," said Sands. "There was a little trouble over a cow hide Crimp was having buried in a hurry. Crimp's woman said that you keep them supplied with beef, Circle-S beef. Singleton says the woman's lying. What do you say, Matt?"

Hagarthy's face grew longer, darker, more dour. "She told you the truth," he said, and not at all grudgingly. The challenge was still in his voice.

"All right, Matt."

"What do you mean — all right?"

Sands shrugged. "I wanted the truth. I'd gotten the notion that Crimp might be mixed up in the rustling. He went off half-cocked when I jumped him about the hide. Pulled a shotgun on me. What could a man think? It looked like he was scared, scared because he had something to hide. Why'd he get so riled up if he was given a beef by Circle-S's ramrod?"

"You're a little rough, Sands. Maybe you scared him."

"Maybe."

"As for my supplying Crimp with beef — "

"Never mind," Sands cut in. "That's between you and Singleton. He thinks you wouldn't pull a stunt like that, so — "

"Listen, Sands," Hagarthy said savagely. "Get it straight. A couple years ago XIX Ranch offered me a job, a better job than I've got here. I didn't take it because Singleton talked me out of it. He handed me a lot of gab about a partnership deal. A promise — see? But that's all it was, a promise. I'm still bossing this outfit at the same wages I always got. So I figure I rate a Circle-S beef every once in a while, for whoever I like. You savvy?"

"Sure, Matt," said Sands. "Like I said, that's between Sin-

gleton and you. I just brought it up because I'm still wondering why Crimp wanted to kill me."

Hagathy spat. "And that," he growled, "is between Crimp and you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE guests began arriving late in the afternoon, and by sundown the ranchyard was jammed with buggies, carriages, buckboards, and plain ranch wagons. The corrals were filled with harness and saddle horses. There were nearly a hundred people from neighboring ranches and from Rawlins.

The paper lanterns were lighted, giving the big log-and-stone ranchhouse a festive look. There were musicians; they were given seats at one end of the veranda, and soon two fiddles, a guitar, a banjo, and a mouth organ went lustily into such airs as "Cotton-Eye Joe," "Saddle Old Spike, I Tell You," and "Mississippi Sawyer." The veranda was wide enough for dancing, cow-country style.

Supper was served by the ebony-skinned Arch and the moon-faced, pigtailed Lin Chung, but those two were so hard pressed that finally several good neighbor women pitched in and gave them a hand. Liquid refreshments flowed in quantity and with variety. There was whiskey — good imported whiskey, not cowtown red-eye — for the men. Punch and lemonade for the ladies, cider for the few children. But when John Singleton suggested a toast to his wife, whose birthday it was, everyone was given a stem-glass of champagne.

It was something, Ed Sands reflected, to see those ranch people sampling the champagne with nervous sips.

Sands knew none of the guests except for Abb Clayton and Steve Henderson — and maybe himself, [illegible] of the Circle-S hands except Charlie Wall. The latter had more of an observer than a participant in the festivity. He drifted about, studying faces. He sought Laurie, but failed to find her at first. When he did see her, she was dancing with a fresh-faced, yellow-haired young man that seemed to be having the time of his life. Laurie was smiling, hard, actual, but only in a polite way. There was no sunlight in her eyes.

Claire Singleton was the belle of the ball, of course, and the

most attractive woman present. Her color was high, and her eyes sparkled. Like the cowpuncher dancing with Laurie, she seemed to be having the time of her life. And Sands was sure that it was no mere act, no pretense. These cow-country people were certainly not Claire's kind, yet she seemed happy with them. She was wearing a dress of some filmy pale green material that must have cost her husband the price of half a dozen steers on the current poor market. There was a diamond necklace at her ivory throat, a diamond bracelet on each of her slim wrists. Claire among these women in mail-order hose and home-sewn dresses was as out of place as a person from another planet, yet Ed Sands had to marvel at the ease with which she mingled with them.

He came face to face with her presently, and she asked, "Are you having a good time, Mr. Sands?" It seemed important that he was; she had a way about her, this woman had. Sands smiled, said, "A very good time. It's a fine party. Congratulations, Mrs. Singleton; may you have many more birthday parties."

"Thank you, Ed. I may call you that?"

"Why not?"

"You won't think I'm too bold?"

He smiled, amused now. "I won't think that," he said. He saw a hint of mockery in her eyes. "I'm sure you'll never be too bold with me."

"I think you should find yourself a partner, Ed," she said. "Isn't there some woman here who catches your eye?"

Sands had no opportunity to reply to that, for now huge Abe Clayton approached the woman and said, with his beaming smile, "I took the liberty of bringing an uninvited guest, Mrs. Singleton. I've already had him meet your husband, and now, if you'll be so kind, I'd like to present Mr. to you. It's Mr. Henderson over there . . ."

Sands saw Claire's smile waver, saw a clouded look come into her eyes. But then she was smiling again and saying, "Of course, Mr. Clayton. Excuse me, Ed."

Sands nodded, watched her go off with the fat man. He had the impression that an introduction was necessary, that it was not an act which was natural to her, to an acquaintance between Claire Singleton and Stacy Henderson. He saw it

only in pantomime, heard nothing of what was said, but the impression stayed with him. Perhaps it was Henderson's manner, somehow mocking; his thin smile, his too-formal bow, and the deliberate, almost intimate way he looked into the woman's eyes. Perhaps it was the sudden loss of poise in her. . . . Sands watched and wondered.

Then, glancing about, he saw that others were watching Clayton, Henderson and Mrs. Singleton: Matt Hagerty, with a twisted smile on his dark face; Lonnie impassively; John Singleton, his eyes bleak as he was showed a false attentiveness to a talkative guest.

Laurie suddenly turned away, smilingly shook her head to a man who accosted her, and disappeared the [illegible] steps. Sands saw her glance nervously about, and, as though feeling sure she was not observed, hurried out into the rundown yard. She disappeared into the outer darkness, beyond some of the rigs crowding the yard. Sands followed shortly, and found her standing by the big cottonwood at the side of the yard. She was peering out across the range. She whirled, startled, as he came up behind her.

Sands said, "Tired of the party already, Laurie?" and struck a match to light the cigarette he had rolled while following her. He held the match high, after lighting up, looking at her in its flickering glow. Her eyes were frightened or worried. She was in green. Her dress was full-skirted, the bodice form-fitting. Sands dropped the match, said, "That dress does a lot for you. You do a lot for it."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot," she said and laughed nervously. "It's not a new dress, really. I spent a lot of time letting it out. It couldn't have shrunk since I last wore it, I suppose. . . ."

"That you've grown up since then?"

"I guess that's about it."

"And that's why you bought that [illegible] of [illegible] himself?" [illegible] about it?"

He chuckled. "Am I [illegible] something [illegible] you?" he said. Then, soberly, "What are you [illegible] about, Laurie?"

"I . . . Why, nothing."

"[illegible] [illegible] dried [illegible] up?"

"Now, see here —"

She heard it, then. So did Sands.

A rider coming across the range.

Laurie must have guessed the rider's identity, for she said, in a hoarse whisper, "Oh, no — No!" even before he loomed through the darkness. Then, sure of him, she gasped, "Russ — No!"

Russ Nolan was swaying in the saddle, and his voice was thick as he reined in and said, with drunken good humor, "Didn't promise you, honey. Didn't give you my word that I wouldn't come to the shindig."

"Russ, please — "

"Nothing doing, honey," Nolan said, his voice getting loud. "I didn't get an invitation, but I came anyway. You know what I'm going to do, Laurie honey?" He gave her a drunken leer. "Me, I'm going right in and wishing Claire a happy birthday. Yep, I'll show old John Singleton that I'm neighborly if he ain't. Why, dammit!" Anger was in his voice now. "I'll ride right in so everybody sees that Russ Nolan ain't one to hold a grudge on a lady's birthday!"

Laurie said again, "Russ, please — " She moved in front of his horse just as he kneed it forward. Sands caught her, pulled her aside. He understood the girl's alarm. Anything could happen if Russ Nolan and John Singleton encountered each other. And Nolan, drunk though he was, was also aware of it. Because he was drunk, he would welcome whatever might come of such a meeting.

Sands said, "Nolan, turn back. Get out of here!"

Nolan sneered, "My friend Sands! Just when I was beginning to like him, he goes and shoots my friend Crimp!" He'd jerked his horse to a stop and now drew his gun. "Ain't getting out, Sands," he said. "Nobody's making me get out."

He brandished the gun, was as dangerous as any drunk with a deadly weapon, and Sands, his own gun in the holster, was helpless. He felt back a step, pushing Laurie away with his arm. Nolan jabbed spurs to his horse, headed toward the ranchhouse. He let out a wild yell and fired a shot into the air. Sands swore, ran to the nearest rig, a buckboard, and yanked the whip off it. He came up behind Nolan as the man was about to shoot out his gun again and cut him across the neck with the whip. Nolan yelped and dropped his

gun, and Sands, dropping the whip, caught him by the arm and pulled him from the saddle. Nolan landed hard, lay sprawled.

The music had stopped at the crash of the shot. The talk and the laughter, too. Now everybody was staring toward the ranchyard, and some of the boldest men came hurrying forward. John Singleton came with Mary Hegarty at his heels. They looked at Russ Nolan, Hegarty swearing under his breath and Singleton demanding, "What happened, Ed?"

"Nothing much. Nolan's had too much to drink, that's all."

"He fired that shot?"

Sands nodded. "But not at anybody," he said. "He was shooting at the moon." He leaned past Singleton, noticed the man's wife on the veranda steps. She had something from the bodice of her dress — it appeared to be a paper of some sort — and handed it to a man who stood there with her. She descended the steps, came across the yard. The man pocketed the paper. It was Stace Henderson. Sands looked back at Singleton. "No harm done," he added. "I'll get rid of him."

He picked up Nolan's gun, broke it, punched the cartridges from it, then shoved it into the man's holster. Nolan was trying to get up, and Sands gave him a hand. The fall had sobered him somewhat, and now he merely looked sick. Sands held onto him with one hand, and with the other caught up the horse's reins. He led man and animal away from there, and Singleton and others turned back to the house. Nolan broke away, sagged against the trunk of the cottonwood tree, made retching sounds. Laurie came and stood beside Sands.

"Russ, you sure played the fool," Sands said. "What were you trying to prove, anyway?"

Nolan swore, gasping for breath.

He shoved away from the tree, staggered to his horse, mounted. Laurie said, "Russ — [illegible]" and Russ rode slowly away.

Sands turned to the girl. "You expected him," he asked. "You were afraid he'd come and do something?"

She nodded. "I was sure of it," she said thickly. "I rode out to his place this morning to ask him — beg him — not to come. But it [illegible] wasn't bad [illegible] to you."

"You should have told me about it."

"What good would that have done?"

"I'd have ridden out and stopped him."

"How did I know?"

Sands nodded. "You couldn't know," he told her. "I'll grant you that. But you could confide in me, Laurie." He shook his head. "I can't figure that Nolan. This morning he sent a couple of his tough hands to gun me down, yet tonight he has guts enough to come here, knowing he'd have to face me."

Laurie gave him a startled look. "No, I don't believe it," she said, quick to defend Nolan. "Russ is a fool, but he wouldn't do anything like that. If he wanted you killed, Sands, he'd try to kill you, himself. He wouldn't order his hands to do it."

"He'll have to convince me of that, one of these days."

"If you only knew him as I do!"

"I'm beginning to know him well enough."

"He's just wild, Sands, and foolish."

Sands nodded. "He's a fool, all right," he said. "Tonight proves that. Doesn't he realize that John Singleton already suspects him of being involved with his wife? His coming here now could only make your father think one thing: that it was to see Claire."

"That woman!" Laurie said bitterly.

"So you blame her for what Nolan's done?"

"I understand Russ, I tell you."

"That's more than I do."

"He's been accused of stealing Circle-S stock," Laurie said, very much upset. "He knows John Singleton suspects him of having an affair with that — that woman. He's wrongly accused and wrongly suspected, and that makes him defiant. So he comes here foolishly hoping to bait my father, to taunt him. He's like a small boy blamed for something he didn't do and, unable to prove his innocence, defies everybody."

"He's a damn' good-looking boy," Sands said dryly. "But I can't see any man becoming jealous of him just because of his looks. What was the start of it all, anyway?"

"Russ worked for Circle-S until after she came here," Laurie said slowly, reluctantly. She still couldn't bring herself to trust Ed Sands. "He was at the horse camp where Ben Lance is now. Claire learned to ride. She learned fast, I'll grant her that. It wasn't long before she was riding alone —

and Lay. She got into the habit of riding to the home ranch."

"So?" Sands prompted.

"My father found out about it," she continued. "He followed her one day, and I — well, I followed him because I was afraid something terrible might happen. But Dad nearly vanished from the brush. I did, too. But the whole time Claire was at the ranch, Russ kept busy working with a horse he was breaking. He just ignored her. She finally went home. That night Dad and she had an awful quarrel. The next day they left on a trip, and Matt Hagerthy gave Russ his time. . . . Russ went to Bisbee, got drunk. Dad's second thought he'd been fired because of John Singleton's wife. That started a lot of ugly gossip. And of course, Dad found a chance to come home."

"What happened then, Laurie?"

"Nothing, for a time," she said. "Claire had gotten around him during their trip. She came home with a lot of new clothes and some jewelry," Laurie's voice turned bitter. "What she wants with expensive clothes and a small fortune in jewelry out here, I don't know. But things were all right between her and Dad for a time. Russ had gone to the lowlands. Abe Clayton had staked him."

"Clayton did, eh?"

"Yes. For a profit, of course."

"Then the rustling started?"

Laurie nodded. "After a time Claire began to ride alone again," she said. "And Dad thinks she's meeting Russ. But she isn't."

"But she does meet some man?"

"I think so."

"Who is he, Laurie?"

"I will not believe that I'm any one else it is," Laurie said bitterly. "And I don't want you to believe, Sands. They are meeting, perhaps a man killed because of her."

"It's Stace Henderson, isn't it?"

Laurie gave him a look of dismay. "How Dad thinks that?"

"No," said Sands. "Not that I know of, Laurie. It's not even suspicion. Laurie, I've got a query to make about this trouble. It's an angle, some Claire mentioned to Charles S. Ill agree with that. But I've a feeling that Henderson is more than just another man after Dan for her husband. I've had a talk with him, a good

long talk, and I wouldn't let her out of my sight if she was my woman. But there's more to it."

"What do you mean, Sands?"

He took out makings, fashioned a cigarette. When he lighted it, his face was frowning thoughtfully in the glare of the match. He said, "It's all mixed up, but there's a pattern — if a person could make it out. Able Clayton sets Nolan up as a horse rancher in the badlands, and the rustling breaks out. Today I ran into Clayton and Henderson at Crimp's Place, and later Crimp tries to kill me because of a butchered Circle-S steer. I ride out, and a couple of Nolan's riders follow me, try to kill me. Matt Hagarthy gave Crimp that steer. Henderson is interested in buying some range, and Clayton wants to get the Bench from John Singleton for him. Now we have Henderson friendly with Singleton's wife. It's all mixed up, but it's not as loco as it seems on the surface."

He fell silent, hearing someone crossing the ranchyard.

A man appeared, making for one of the rigs, a buggy from which the horse had not been unhitched. It was Stace Henderson. He led his horse and buggy out from the other rigs, and Sands started toward him.

Laurie said anxiously, "Sands, don't you start anything!" He ignored her, convinced that it was time he started finding out what was really happening on Pipestem range. He had a hunch that if he started with either Able Clayton or Stace Henderson, he would be starting at the top — and Henderson was handy.

He'd been threatened by a shotgun and shot at by a pair of tough hands, and it was time for him to play a little rough. As Henderson faced him, he caught hold of his arm and said, "Friend, you and I are going to have a little talk."

Henderson tried to break away and started to yell when he failed.

Sands slapped him hard across the mouth, silencing him.

Henderson staggered, dazed. Behind Sands, Laurie Singleton gasped, "Sands, you fool —!" He paid no attention to her. He reached inside Henderson's coat and took an envelope from it. It was what he had seen Claire give the man, there on the veranda steps when she thought no one was watching.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SANDS kept his grip on Henderson, who was still too dazed to break away, and handed the envelope to Laurie. "Open it," he told her. He fumbled a match from his pocket, passed it to her. Laurie said uneasily, "Do you know what you're doing?"

He didn't answer. He kept his eyes on Henderson. The man was slowly recovering from the hard slap, and Sands could feel his hatred and rage. Laurie tore open the envelope, struck the match on a spoke of one of the buggy's wheels. She gasped. And said, "It's money, Sands. A lot of money. About five hundred dollars."

"Smell that envelope."

"Perfume, Sands!"

"I figured so."

"But what — what does it mean?"

"This dude will tell us," Sands said. "Why is Mrs. Singleton giving you money, friend?" Henderson tried to jerk loose. Sands growled, "Must I rough you up to make you talk?"

A voice said, "I wouldn't do that, Mr. Sands," and Able Clayton loomed hugely through the darkness. He held a derringer in one fat hand, its over-and-under barrels aimed at Sands' middle.

Sands stared at the tiny weapon in Clayton's great fist and felt his nerves knot up. He knew how deadly a derringer could be at close range, and the fat man kept coming closer. "I don't understand you, Mr. Sands," Clayton said, a rebuke in his voice. "Mr. Henderson and I tried to be friendly toward you, and in return you manhandle him — and, if I'm not wrong, rob him. Really, Mr. Sands!"

Sands felt a sudden alarm. Clayton talked like a fool, but behind it he was as dangerous, Sands realized, as any man likely to be encountered in Fiddlestick [illegible]. Turning Henderson loose, he faced Clayton warily. He was afraid to move, afraid that the fat man would shoot in the [illegible] excitation. But it was Henderson who [illegible] a revolver from inside his coat and [illegible] with it.

Sands tried to duck, but Henderson, [illegible] himself with rage, was too fast for him. The gun barrel caught Sands alongside the head. He reeled away as pain exploded in him, his

legs wobbling. Henderson cursed, struck him again, knocking him to his knees. He heard Laurie cry out, then she must have crashed upon him. He pitched forward onto his face in an agony of pain, then was suddenly numbed by near unconsciousness.

They were gone when his senses returned, and only the girl was there. She was kneeling beside him, not caring that her pretty dress was in the dirt. She helped him to a sitting position, asked anxiously, "Ed—Ed, how bad is it?"

Dazed though he was, he resented her use of his given name. He held his head in his hands. He wasn't ashamed of the groan that escaped him. "Bad enough," he muttered. "I did play the fool, too, didn't I?"

"Well, you did ask for it," Laurie said.

"They took the money?"

"Yes."

"No matter. It's knowing about it that counts."

He got to his feet, stood swaying for a moment, then went to the nearest rig, a buckboard, and sagged against it. His head throbbed painfully, and small wonder, after those blows upon it. He was lucky that he had a thick head of hair, and that Henderson carried a short barreled revolver of small caliber.

Laurie said, "Ed, is there something I can do for you?"

He said not. "I'll go turn in shortly," he said. "Sleep is the only cure for what happened to me. I sure disarm Henderson. I figured him for a pushover."

"Why would Claire give money to him, Ed?"

"I'm wondering," Sands told her. "He can't be what he claims, a man repping for some big money interests, or he wouldn't be taking a few hundred dollars from a woman. Laurie, if the Sinclair cloud had cut out about that . . ."

"You'll not tell him?"

"Lord, no."

"Something has got to be done about her."

"Don't you try to do anything," Sands told her. "Don't you play the fool, too. Leave that to Pete Sinclair and to me." He stepped away from the buckboard, hoped that he was still

none too steady on his feet. "I'm going to sleep on it," he said, and headed for the bunkhouse.

Ben Luray loafed along on his black night horse, several miles south of the horse camp. He watched the approach of a storm, its fireworks bright against the northwest sky. He heard the rolling rumble of the thunder. Suddenly Luray heard something else, a hard drumming of hoofs not far off. He pulled up short, peering about, then glimpsed a pair of riders topping a swell of ground. They were limned briefly against the lightning-splashed sky. That glimpse showed Ben Luray that the two were riding east, in the direction of Circle-S headquarters, and riding hard.

He was surprised, puzzled. He knew about the party, of course. He had been told by Matt Hagarthy that he could come in for it, if he wished, but, being a man who liked his own company, he had remained at the horse camp. He had supposed that all the other Circle-S hands would be at the shindig; knowing the bunch, he couldn't imagine any of them, except perhaps Hagarthy, passing it up. Yet those two were Circle-S riders; Luray was somehow sure of that, and he couldn't figure out a reason for their night riding.

They were well beyond hailing distance already, and Luray was not inclined to attempt to overtake them. But curiosity worked at him. They had come from the hills, but not from any of the regularly used trails. They'd come from the direction of a canyon that was only brush and rock. . . . Ben Luray was a man who knew his job, and gave all he had to it. He was a bronc-buster, but he was also posted at the horse camp to watch out for rustlers. It had occurred to him before, and now he suspected it, that maybe some of the Circle-S's own men were involved in the stealing of the outfit's cattle. He decided to have a look at that canyon, storm or no storm.

He rode slowly, warily, his rifle across his saddle. His black horse and his dark clothing blended well with the night; but the lightning flashes, increasingly brighter, bothered him. He was but a short distance into the canyon when he heard other riders — riders making the racket it always took to get cattle into motion. He heard their yelps, the creaking of saddle leather, the sharp striking of shod hoofs against rocks,

the popping of catclaws slapping at raw critters. He didn't want to tangle with them, but he wanted his look at them. He was gone. Ben Luray was, and he was loyal to his outfit and he knew his job.

Lightning blossomed. Filled the canyon from wall to wall with a chill eerie light. Luray had his look, too much of one. Two riders crashed through the brush after half a dozen cattle in a bunch. One saw Luray, screamed, "Watch it!" in wild alarm. Luray swung his rifle up, but a gun spurted powder-flame at him. He felt the slug tear into him, deep into the vitals of him. He lost his grip on his ride, grabbed for his tied reins. The rustler's gun crashed again, and another slug tore into him. He brought the black about, and the animal, badly spooked, broke into a hard run. Luray began to slump forward. He gripped the saddle-horn with both hands, and still that wasn't grip enough.

He began to fall from the galloping horse.

And he was dead before he hit the ground.

Russ Nolan's anger didn't last long. In fact, once away from Circle-S headquarters, he laughed at himself. He was sober now, at least sober enough to realize that he'd played the fool. If he had been sober tonight, if he'd not stopped by Crimp's Place and let the fat man urge rotgut whiskey on him, he wouldn't have gone to the Circle-S. The things a man did when he was liked-up! Whiskey was Russ Nolan's weakness, and he was well aware of it. *Ought to go on the wagon,* he told himself.

He was half in earnest.

The stunt he had pulled tonight could have gotten him killed. He'd been lucky that Lannie had been watching for him and that Sands had been with her. If Sands hadn't stopped him, he might have come up against Matt Hagarthy or some of the Circle-S hands who would have used a gun on him instead of roughing him up a little as Sands had done.

He rode south across Circle-S range, then swung southwest and turned into the road to Crimp's Place beyond the Old Homestead. He traveled without haste, and the storm broke about him long before he reached the hills. He pushed his horse then, but it was tired and the going was hard. The road

was flooded in spots, and one long quagmire. It was long after midnight when he neared Crimp's, and by then the worst of the storm was past.

He heard a clatter of hoofs on the bridge spanning the swollen Lost Squaw, and had a glimpse of a rider leaving the bridge and swinging north. It was too dark for him to identify the rider, and he wasn't curious about him anyway. He rode across, went to the barn. After putting his horse up, he went to the barroom. It was deserted, and a single lamp burned dimly.

Nolan was soaked to the skin and cold to the core of him. He debated with himself, decided that one drink wouldn't harm him. He went behind the bar, found an empty cup, and filled it at one of the whiskey kegs. It was a long drink, and it not only warmed but also numbed him. Nolan came from behind the bar, found a bench in the corner of the room. He shoved it against the wall, and stretched out on it.

He was vaguely aware that someone entered the room and came to his side. He opened his eyes and fuzzily saw Kate Crimp bending over him.

"Russ," she said, "you'd better get out of those wet clothes."

"Naw. . . . I'm all right."

"You'll catch your death of cold."

"Leave me alone."

"All right. But I'll get a blanket for you."

She went away, but shortly returned and covered him. He looked at her dully. She was wearing a wrapper that once may have been a fancy thing but was now faded and limp with long usage. His eyes closed, and almost at once he was snoring. Kate gazed at him for a long moment. He was young, he was handsome in a coarse fashion. She could understand that women might find him attractive. For herself, she was always disgusted with a man who drank too much. She had enough of that with Will Crimp.

At Circle-S headquarters, the cowhands were busy with chores but didn't let dampen the gaiety of the night. Most of the cowhands crowded into the bunkhouse. Two the Circle-S hands and some cowhands from neighboring ranches sought shelter in the bunkhouse. They brought drinks along. They

were full of hell and laughter. A half dozen got a poker game going. And Ed Sands got no sleep.

He'd been unable to sleep, even when he had the bunkhouse to himself. He was badly hurt. His head ached almost unbearably, putting him to feel sick deep inside. He had come to Circle-S for two reasons. He had been broke, in need of money. And he had answered a friend's call for help. But money was a little thing, of small importance; he could have signed around to get by on elsewhere. As for John Singleton.

The man was changed. There was no longer friendship between them.

Two attempts on his life in one day, and tonight a gun-whipping. For what?

The old Laurie entered into it, in some fashion. He was alone in her, he admitted to himself. He had known a number of women; a man who lived out wherever there was trouble was bound to come into contact with women of one sort or another. But he had never met one, until he met Laurie Henderson, one whom he wanted to share his life.

Sands tried to find some prospects for himself and failed. Hot anger came, and his mind wrestled with it. There was the Bench, good range going begging. Clayton and Henderson saw its possibilities, though their reasons for wanting it might be other than what they claimed. True, the squatters held part of it. But there was far more they didn't hold, range enough for thousands of head of cattle.

He might be able to make some deal with Singleton for the unoccupied part of the Bench, providing he managed to stay alive and settle Circle-S's trouble. It would take money to stock such a range, a lot of money. Again he might be able to make a deal with Singleton.

Ed Sands wasn't the same man who had come reluctantly to Flagstone ranch to do a job at target shooting. He was changed from the man he had been before Stacy Henderson beat his face with a carbine. For the first time he had an aim in life. For the first time he wanted to put down roots. . . . And behind it, he felt in motion, was his desire for the girl Laurie.

She would probably have laughed had he told her. . . .

The worst of the storm was over by midnight, and there was only a light rainfall when the guests began to leave for their homes. The last few departed at two o'clock, and quiet returned to Circle-S headquarters. But it was nearly dawn before Ed Sands finally slept.

He slept late and awakened with a throbbing headache. The Circle-S hands were already out on the range when Sands went to the corral-shack. He drank several Arch's cures, very hot and very black, and listening to the colored man tell of what a fine party it had been, the coffee helped ease the pain in his head. But when he came outside the sunlight hurt his eyes. It would take time, Sands knew, to get over that gun-whipping.

He didn't see even old Charlie Wellhart, though he went to the barn and the bunkhouse and the commissary. But he saw Laurie crossing the ranchyard when he halted to light a cigarette. She was wearing her riding clothes again. She came to him, eying him anxiously.

"Ed, how are you? How do you feel?"

"I've been in better shape. I've felt better," he told her. "But I'll be all right in a day or two."

"You don't look too well."

"And it worries you, Laurie?"

"Well, yes," said Laurie. Then, after a moment of studying him worriedly, "I put it up to Claire, Ed. Her giving Henderson money, I mean. She knew him in Chicago when she was an actress, an actress without a part, and he loaned her some money. She's paid him back now, and she says she's done with him. I — well, I believe her."

Sands nodded. "Could be," he said and lighted his cigarette. "And I imagine Henderson's nothing, I guess." He looked beyond Laurie and across the range, saw a rider coming in from the northwest at a hard run. "Looks like something's wrong," he said. "Somebody's in a big hurry."

Laurie turned, gazed intently at the rider. "It's Charlie Wellhart," she said. "This is the day we'd be taking pay-roll money out to Bar-Lazy at the lower ranch. You don't suppose that — "

Sands started across the yard to meet Charlie.

Charlie gained in spurting down. He was out of breath and

wide-eyed with excitement. "It's Luray," he said thickly. "He's dead." He drew a trembling hand across his leathery face. "His horse was at the camp, saddled and its reins tied back. It'd been ridden during the storm last night. The mud was caked on it. I left my pack horse and went looking for Luray. I found him a couple miles south of the horse camp."

Sands said, "Better go tell the boss," and he felt a little of what old Charlie Wall was feeling. He'd met Ben Luray but once, yet he'd pegged the man as an all-right sort. He turned to Laurie as Charlie headed for the ranchhouse. "It's busting wide open," he said flatly.

John Singleton came from the house with Charlie Wall, his face stiff with anger. He was giving the old man orders as they crossed the yard. Charlie was to take a fresh mount and ride to Rawlins to send a telegram to the county seat, to the sheriff. On the way he was to send Matt Hagarthy in off the south range. To Sands, he said, "We'll ride up there, Ed."

They didn't talk at all on the way to the horse camp, where they found Charlie's pack horse and Ben Luray's still-saddled black. They swung south and shortly came upon Luray's body lying in a hollow. There was water in the center of the hollow. Luray lay in mud, face down. Sands said, "Let's get him out of there." Singleton nodded jerkily and swore under his breath as he dismounted. Matt Hagarthy and a couple hands were coming up at a hard run when Sands and Singleton got the dead man into the grass where it was dry.

Hagarthy said, reining in, "Chris will be along with a wagon to haul him in." He avoided looking at the body. "Too bad," he added. "Ben was all right."

Singleton said bitterly, "They've gone too far. Stealing Circle-S cattle is one thing, killing Circle-S men is another. I want Luray's murderers." He turned to Sands. "Now you know what I brought you here for. Ed. Get those bush-whackers. Get them no matter what it costs or how long it takes. I want every last one of them!"

Sands nodded. "It may take time," he said, mentating his horses. "The storm last night washed out their tracks, that's sure. If they made off with our cattle, it might take us a long time to find their trail." He gestured toward the nearby hills. "Why, they can drive cattle through near here."

"There's a canyon," Singleton replied. "Its entrance is about a half mile from here."

"Where's it lead?"

"Its far end is an easy climb to the Bench."

"I'll have a look," Sands said and turned his horse away.

He entered the canyon a few minutes later, the descent an easy slope. It was a narrow gorge, no more than two hundred feet deep at its deepest part. Soon after reaching its floor, Sands saw a rifle lying in a muddy puddle. Luray's rifle, he supposed. He rode on at a lope, not bothering to cut for sign. He was sure that Luray had encountered the rustlers early in the evening, before or during the storm. The heavy rain would have washed away all tracks. The canyon was never more than a hundred yards wide. It was wild with brush, studded with boulders. It lost depth so gradually that Sands finally reached its far rim without his horse having much of a climb, and he came out into one of the valleys that made up the Bench. He was south of the Lost Squaw's roaring gorge, but still north of the valley in which the squatters and Crimp had settled. He cut for sign here, but without success. He rode across the valley to the creek, and the stream was high and swift with flood water.

Sands paused here for a smoke, and shortly Singleton appeared with Matt Hagarthy and the two Circle-S punchers. As those four struck across the valley, three more Circle-S riders came from the canyon. Singleton asked, as he and Hagarthy reined in, "Find any sign, Ed?"

"No."

"They sure didn't cross that water with cattle," Hagarthy said, nodding toward the creek. "Unless they're better at handling cattle than any man I know."

"You could be right," said Sands.

"But you think I'm not?"

"I'm not thinking, just guessing."

"So what's your guess?" Hagarthy demanded.

"If they got here before the storm or even right at its worst," Sands said, "they could have taken a small bunch of stock across. It would take some time for the creek to rise to where it is now." He scrubbed at and the surveyor's map. "By crossing here, they could swim north through the hills

and reach the badlands. And that's the kind of country rustlers like."

"And," Singleton put in, "it's Russ Nolan's country."

Hagarthy grunted with disgust. "I'm not saying Nolan's clean," he said. "I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. I'm just claiming that it wasn't the kind of night to make off with a bunch of cattle to the badlands. Nolan and his crowd would have had to turn them loose when they get this far." He gave Sands a flat, challenging look. "The Lost Squaw rises faster than you think."

"Well," said Sands, "what's your idea?"

"The squatters," Hagarthy replied. "It was easy going for them, storm or no storm. I'd gamble that we'll find they've got some Circle-S beef hid out somewhere on their part of the Bench. I know the breed. . . ." A rough tone of hate edged his voice. "And there never was a squatter that didn't like a rancher's beef. I'm for riding their way, and for clearing them out, once and for all, if we find any Circle-S cattle down there."

John Singleton looked undecided. "I can't see any sizable bunch of cattle crossing the Lost Squaw, the way it is now. But it's harder for me to believe that the squatters would kill for some beef."

Hagarthy said curtly, "Make up your mind, boss."

Sands eyed him curiously, wondering if the ranch boss had another reason than just a cowman's natural hatred for dirt farmers that made him so anxious to run the squatters off the Bench. It occurred to Sands, and he was jolted by the thought, that maybe Matt Hagarthy, like himself, had some notion of one day making a deal with John Singleton for his hill-country range.

Singleton said finally, "For my money, it's Russ Nolan and his crowd. Drunk or sober, Nolan's wild enough to cross [illegible] over Dead Water. And if Dan Lancy caught Mac riding Circle-S range . . . Well, Nolan's the kind of man who'd kill to cover up his tracks. We'll look for the badlands."

CHAPTER NINE

RATHER than swim the swollen creek, they kept to the west of the Lost Squaw and followed much the same course that Ed Sands had taken on his way from Nolan's ranch the day before. They saw no riders as they rode down into the badlands. Hagarthy gestured toward the few scattered hundreds of cattle in the distance, and said, "No use looking them over. They're sure to wear no brand but Nolan's." They rode on to the big ranch buildings. But the place was deserted. Nolan's horses were in a fenced meadow, the corrals empty. Circle-S halted here to rest their mounts, and Hagarthy told one of his hands, the swarthy Pete Bixler, to go into the big house and make some coffee. They ate quite quickly, stretching their legs, and Bixler went inside.

Ed Sands said, "What's north of the badlands?"

"Mining country," Singleton told him. "Beyond the hills rimming the north end of the basin. About forty miles to the nearest mining camp."

"Always a good market for cheap beef, mining country."

"Nolan wouldn't risk crossing the *malpais* in that direction."

"Only if he's as much a fool as he sometimes acts," Sands said dryly. "It'd be a long drive for stolen stock. The rustlers wouldn't risk being overtaken out there if they were trailed. What's west of this barren country, John?"

"Some open range. It's not much good," Singleton told him. "There's a cattle trail through it from the Broken Bow country about eighty miles north. It runs down to the railroad. There's a town of sorts along the trail: Black Timbers. More of a place like Crispy's than a town, but some bigger. A couple freighting roads branch off there, one going west and the other north. It's about six miles from the southeastern corner of the badlands, and the railroad is a dozen miles to south."

"Sounds like Black Timbers is worth watching."

"You think . . . ?"

Sands nodded. "The rustlers couldn't sell that big bunch," he said. "We may hear the cattle coming in long east and all today. Could be that they have a buyer for cattle at Black Timbers. Once across the Lost Squaw, they maybe trailed on west through the hills and—"

"No chance," Singleton broke in. "The hills get too rough."

"Then by swinging up here into the badlands," said Sands, "and following the hills west, keeping to the base of them. They could break out of the basin at its southwest corner, then take that cattle trail to Black Timbers." He turned to Hagarthy, who was hunkered down in the shade at the side of the cabin. "What do you think, Matt?"

Hagarthy shrugged. "It's your idea," he said sourly.

They drank the coffee Pete Bixler made, then John Singleton — in a foolish gesture, Ed Sands reflected — gave Pete a silver dollar to leave inside the house to pay for it. Evidently, Singleton didn't want Russ Nolan to be in a position to say that Circle-S had taken anything from him without paying up. They mounted and headed west, Sands riding on Singleton's right and Matt Hagarthy on his left. The five Circle-S hands followed.

The country grew rough. There was lots of rock and scrub brush. There were myriad gullies and broad hollows, eroded humps and broken ridges. The storm had wetted down the badlands as it had Circle-S range, and so there was no chance of a bunch of cattle raising a dust cloud no matter how fast it was being driven. That was in the rustlers' favor, and, in fact, the country itself favored them. It was impossible to see much of the badlands from any one point; there was no sweeping view of the land as might be had on ordinary range.

Sands kept studying the rock hills. From a distance they appeared an unbroken wall of red sandstone, but, seen closer, there were broken, eroded cliffs. After traveling perhaps three miles from Nolan's headquarters, Sands saw a movement in the shadows of the cliffs far ahead and said, "Hold on. There's something."

They all reined in, peered in the direction Sands pointed. Singleton shook his head for a time and said, "My eyes aren't that good any more. You see anything, Matt?" Hagarthy replied, slowly, grudgingly, "There's something."

"Riders," Sands said. "Cattle."

"How far ahead?" Singleton asked.

"A mile, maybe more," Sands told him. "We'd sure to get the drift, but the riders will scatter once they catch sight of

us. It is all right by you, John. I'll work my way around and try to head them off. Give me a ten-minute start."

He turned his horse away upon catching Singleton's brief nod, swung farther away from the hills. He kept to the lowest, roughest terrain he could find, riding at an easy lope, and then, having covered perhaps two miles, he turned toward the hills. He topped a rise finally and now could clearly make out riders and cattle. Five riders and a larger bunch of cattle than he had expected: seventy or eighty head, he estimated. He was now about a half mile ahead of the taint. He slowed his horse to a walk, drew his rifle from its boot. Looking east, he saw the Circle-S riders coming along behind the rustlers. Then a gunshot cracked, and Sands saw the riders with the cattle gather in a bunch and rein in. He grunted with anger for the trigger-nervous fool who had made that premature shot. For the rustlers, now warned, were already driving the cattle.

They headed west, riding hard in a tight bunch. For a minute or two Sands thought there was a chance for him to head them off, but before he could get within easy rifle range the five of them disappeared into a narrow cut in the cliffs. A moment later a rifle opened up from the cut, and Sands heard the shriek of the slugs. He pulled up, dropped from the saddle, crouched behind a rock. Shadows lay thick in the narrow passage, and he couldn't see the man who kept sniping at him. The man was good with a rifle. He was hitting the boulder behind which Sands crouched with two shots out of three, and the third shot was close enough over the rock to keep Sands behind cover.

He stretched out, fired a couple shots around the side of the boulder, without any hope of targetting the rustler, as Singleton and his men came along. They dismounted, scurried around for cover, and complete pandemonium broke. The rustler was trapped, his heading blocked. It was apparent that John Singleton was no longer head for the sake of game.

"What fool that shot back there?" Sands asked.

"Pete Bisler. His horse stumbled," Singleton replied, gasping for breath almost every word. "We were riding hard, and he had his gun cocked. A fool thing. You don't know Bisler better."

"Maybe he does know better."

"You think he fired that shot deliberately?"

"Could be."

"To warn the Nolan crowd?"

"He'll never admit it," Sands said. "One of that Nolan crowd — if it is Nolan and his bunch — has got plenty of guts. There's only one rifle shooting, so one man must be covering the escape of the others. That takes nerve, more nerve than I'd give most rustlers credit for. Yeah. . . . It could be Russ Nolan. He's game enough to do something like that. Or fool enough."

The Circle-S hands were all behind cover now, sprawled out behind rocks or lying in gullies. They were keeping up a heavy fire, wasting ammunition. The man in the cut returned the fire in more sensible fashion, shooting only occasionally, trying to make sure of a target but without success so far. Sands took another look but failed to see the man. He said, "Tell Hagarthy and the others to cover me, John. I'll try to get closer."

He rose to a crouching position, then, as Singleton called out to his men and they began a heavier shooting, he darted forward. He gained a hollow twenty feet or more ahead and was safe in it before the rustler fired at him. There was a pause in the firing of the Circle-S guns; then when they opened up again Sands began crawling toward a cluster of small rocks fifty feet or more beyond the hollow. The rustlers drove two slugs at him, but they were several feet too high. He got to the rocks, paused behind them, catching his breath, then crawled on, dragging his rifle toward a long, twisting gully several feet deep.

Rifle slugs spat dirt in his face, but he reached the gully safely and tumbled into it. He could travel on hands and knees now, and the gully led him perhaps a hundred feet closer to the cut in the cliffs. He risked a look over its bank and now could see that the floor of the cut, which seemed about thirty feet wide, was littered with boulders. He could see [illegible] of the riflemen, and no shot came now that he was close and an easier target. The rustler, Sands was beginning to suspect, had pulled back through the pass.

The Circle-S hands were still shooting with a will, and it was a Circle-S gun that almost got Sands. The first shot could

have been poor marksmanship, one of the men behind him dropping his sights for his bow. The slug hit a rock in the gully bank, inches from Sands' head, shrieking shrilly as it ricocheted. The second couldn't be blamed on somebody's poor marksmanship. It dented into the gravel of the bank, even closer to Sands' head. He dropped down flat on his stomach, knowing that somebody behind him—one of the Circle-S men—was trying to kill him.

He was safe enough so long as he didn't expose himself. He remained flat on the bottom of the gully, fully shaken. He admitted it to himself; he'd had the pants of his life. He possessed as much guts as the next man. He had backed the rustler's rifle with an hitching post to keep that somebody in his own crowd had tried to backshoot him was a far different matter. And it unnerved him. He lay down while the Circle-S hands went on scanning mountains. He wondered how long it would be before they realized that they were shooting at nothing, that the rustler was gone from the pass.

The rocket halted abruptly, and John Singleton called, "Hell! Ed, you all right?" Sands didn't answer at once. He was wondering if he dared expose himself now, or if his would-be killer might not let his gun go off once more—and afterward, after he'd gotten Sands, call it an "accident." Like that shot of Pete Bixler's, which had wounded the rustler crowd. Bixler? Bixler had taken a hand in the fight between him and Chris Hanson the other night in the bunkhouse, and Sands had rawhided him up a bit. A man like Pete Bixler would isn't forget or forgive a rawhiding-up, and it was possible that he might, in such all a pucker, back-shoot a man. Or Hagarthy. The man he saw of Matt Hagarthy, the last he'd Sands treated him.

Singleton called out again, and one by one, close to the gully, Sands rose, said easily, "Yeah, I'm all right." He saw the catcher give him a puzzled look, but he didn't explain his reason for remaining hidden for so long. He wanted time to Hagarthy to see if he intended having a shot Sands would gain him nothing. The attempt had been made, but he couldn't prove it. At least, he couldn't prove it enough to see out of the crowd. As for telling Singleton, . . . Sands opinion of Singleton's crowd was a low one. Once, in the old days, he would have depended upon Singleton to discover the man

who had pulled such a stunt. But this new John Singleton would hedge; he'd find excuses, claim that Sands had been endangered by a couple of wild shots, and then forget it. Sands decided that he would let it ride for the time being, work it out later, and in the meantime he wouldn't let Pete Bixler or Matt Hagarthy – or any Circle-S man – get behind him again. He climbed from the gully, his rifle in the bend of his arm. The other men were mounting their horses.

"We've played a losing hand," Sands said. "It was our deal, but somehow we dealt ourselves the wrong cards. There's no use chasing that bunch through the hills. But you've got the cattle. A big bunch, too. If that's the way they've been raiding Circle S – seventy, eighty head at a shot – it's no wonder you've got to break it up."

"It'll break me," Singleton said bitterly, "if it's not stopped."

"Well, there'll be another time," said Sands. "And our luck will be better."

Hagarthy and the hands rode up. The ramrod was leading Singleton's horse, one of the others had Sands' dun in tow. Sands gave both Bixler and Hagarthy a searching look, but their faces told him nothing at all. He booted his rifle, mounted, took out makings, started a cigarette. Singleton told Bixler and two of the others to gather up the cattle and drive them back to their range by way of the Circle-S horse camp. He sent another hand, a man named Dunn, on to the camp to pack out some grub for the three handling the cattle. The remaining puncher, Slim White, rode back across the badlands with Singleton, Hagarthy, and Sands. It was Slim who pointed out later, as they passed some distance south of the place, that there was a saddled horse standing ground-hitched at Buss Nolan's headquarters. There'd been no saddled horse there earlier. Singleton hated "Nolan's" by a long, his voice rough, edged with hate. In this one thing, Ed Sands had to admit, Singleton was still a man. He knew how to hate Buss Nolan.

"If it's Nolan's," Sands said, "he's in the clear. At least, he couldn't have been with the outlaw crew."

Hagarthy gave him a scowling look. "Why the hell couldn't he have been?" he demanded. "He could have ridden this far and put on an innocent look during the time that bushwhacker

stood us off at the cut. He's tricky enough to pull something like that. Let's go have a talk with him."

They swung over toward the ranch buildings, and their approach failed to bring Nolan, or anybody else, from the log house or the barn. The ground-hitched horse was a bay roan gelding, and Hagarthy said, "That's the bronc he rode last night when he came to Circle-S."

"Hasn't been ridden hard today," said Sands. "It's not even blowing."

Hagarthy had an answer for that: "He could have had it staked out somewhere in the hills and just shifted his saddle in a hurry." He lifted his voice, yelled, "Nolan — You, Nolan!"

There was no reply.

Hagarthy swore, growled, "I'll go get him out," and started to dismount.

Sands said, "Never mind," and swung his gun over to the door of the house. He got down, pushed open the door, stepped inside. Russ Nolan was sprawled out on a bunk, fully dressed but for his hat, sound asleep. Hagarthy appeared in the doorway and said sourly, "Come on, Nolan! Quit playing 'possum!"

Sands crossed to the sleeping man, reached out, and lifted Nolan's gun from its holster. He said, "Russ, wake up. You've got visitors." He shook Nolan, finally managed to rouse him. The man hadn't been feigning sleep. Sands was certain of that, from the way he grunted and then gave a start and demanded drowsily, "What's up? What's the matter?" He looked like a man who'd been on a night-long binge. His eyes were bloodshot. His color was bad. Russ Nolan looked sick. Recognizing Sands, he sat up abruptly and swung his feet to the floor. "Sands? What are you doing here?" He saw Hagarthy. "What . . . ?"

"You're in a jam, Russ," Sands said. "Get your size 10s on you."

"What's going on?"

"You don't know?"

"How should I know?" Nolan muttered and leaned over slightly back and forth. He made retching sounds. Then: "Drank last night. Always sick after a drunk. Was sick as a dog on my way up from Crimp's place this morning. Had to

get off my horse and lie down. Stand on the ground for a couple hours, then come on home." He looked up at Sands, his bloodshot eyes disparaging. "Feeling, eh?" His brain was clearing. "What kind of trouble?"

"Bud Lacey was killed last night during the storm," Sands told him. "He couldn't come back to Circle S. We couldn't up with them about an hour ago. Got back the cattle they stole, but didn't catch the rustlers. Hagarthy thinks you were one of them."

Nolan gave Alan Hagarthy a scowling look. "I sure a dream' fool, Hagarthy," he said. "I was at Crimp's Place. Went there from Circle S. Stayed there all night. Yeah. And I can prove it."

Hagarthy said, "You'll have to prove it. Come along."

"You ain't taking my word for it?"

"Doesn' right out," said Hagarthy. "For my money, you're a liar, Nolan."

Nolan's shoulders, his face, tugged toward Hagarthy with his face ugly with quick anger, but his knees buckled and he reeled against the tier of bunks. Hushing them, until his giddiness passed. Then, looking warily at Sands, "A frame-up? I didn't figure you for that kind of a hombre."

"No frame-up," Sands told him. "But you've got to prove you were at Crimp's. Your horses are tied up in the stalling, if you're not. I'd gamble on that, Russ. And if they're in it, you need be — even if you weren't along last night."

"Sands, I never stole a Circle S cow in my life."

"You've got to prove it to Hagarthy and to Singleton."

"Singleton?"

"He's outside, Russ."

All Russ Nolan's cocky high spirits were gone. He looked pale and [illegible], and either by the storm, Sands [illegible] up the stairs. Let down the door, banged it to him. "Let's go to Crimp's," he said.

Sands watched [illegible], walked unsteadily to the door, and there Hagarthy [illegible] way for him. Sands left Nolan's gun on the table, [illegible] him from the house. They mounted, and Sands said to Singleton, "We'll go to Crimp's. [illegible] Bring [illegible] all right after leaving Lacey's. We'll give him a chance to prove it.

John Singleton didn't say anything.

He was staring at Russ Nolan with eyes full of hate.

It was late afternoon when they crossed the bridge over the creek and rode up to Crimp's Place. A farmer was just pulling away in a rickety wagon drawn by a crowbait team. The blacksmith took a look and went back to work in his shed. Sands saw nothing of the kid who had been burying the hide during the first visit, but the dog was there and it started a yelping racket. Crimp's wife came to the doorway of the barroom, then, recognizing the visitors, said something over her shoulder, and the next moment Crimp himself appeared. The fat man's right arm was in a sling. His gaze sought Ed Sands, and a black scowl formed on his heavy face. He came to the edge of the porch as the five riders reined in. He shifted his gaze to Singleton and nodded to him with a show of respect.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Singleton?"

"You know this man?" Singleton demanded, gesturing toward Russ Nolan.

"Russ? Yes, sir. Sure I know Russ Nolan."

"When did you see him last?"

Crimp considered the question at great length. He looked at Russ Nolan, at Matt Hagarthy, at the Circle-S puncher Slim White, at Ed Sands, then back at Singleton. "Last night, early," he said. "Yes, sir. Last night. Russ was here, drinking some and talking a lot. Talking about not being invited to the party at Circle-S. And saying that he was going without an invitation. He rode out, but I can't say where he went from here."

"You didn't see him after that?"

"No, sir. Not until now."

"He didn't return here to spend the night?" Singleton asked.

Crimp looked surprised. "No, he didn't," he said. Then half turned toward his wife in the doorway. "Russ didn't come back here to spend the night after I turned us, did he, Kate?"

Sands wondered at that, feeling it curious that Crimp should draw his wife into it. The fat man wasn't on trial; he didn't need a witness to back up his testimony. Sands looked at the

[illegible] Her eyes were heavy [illegible] that there wasn't breaking in them. Her body was stiff, pleading as in inner tension.

"I didn't see Jim," she said. "I wouldn't have if he'd been here."

Russ Nolan looked pained. "She's lying," he said thickly. "They've been [illegible]." He didn't raise his voice, he was so [illegible]. Then: "Sands! can't you see it? This is a trap!" He [illegible] the last simple words. A wild, desperate look came into his eyes. Then he was jabbing spurs to his [illegible], pulling a [illegible] with rough reins. He had one chance in a thousand, it seemed to Sands, but his luck held. Nolan had a good fast horse under him. He swung around the corner of the building and was gone from sight before Mat Donnelly and Slim White could bring their horses around and start after him.

They swung around the building after him, both drawing their guns, but Nolan was swung around behind the barn and, passing a Lorraine barn and his pursuers, kept them from getting a shot at him. Sands saw him next well beyond the barn, riding hard, riding recklessly, heading for the rough country that [illegible] the ranch. Slim opened up with his six-shooter, but [illegible] the range was too great for a six-gun. Donnelly had dropped his reins, used his rifle, but he was shooting from the back of a running horse and his aim was off. Slim soon drank out of the [illegible], calling over his shoulder, "Come along, Ed! I want him — dead or alive!"

It was an order, but Sands ignored it.

He wanted no part of chasing Russ Nolan.

He wasn't, despite what Grimp and his wife said, convinced that Russ Nolan had been with the rustler crowd even though that band was made up of his riders.

CHAPTER TEN

OF COURSE, Ed Sands was when Sands reached the Circle S ranch, Charlie Wall came from the bunkhouse where Sands was saddling his horse. Old Charlie asked, "Any luck, boy?" Sands was not sure of what he'd hoped to find in the bedlands east of Dave Nelson's ranch and house. He owed a lot more

after turning his tired horse into the corral and saddled it. Charlie said, "Chris Harmon brought Ben's body in. I've got a box about finished, and we'll bury him in the morning."

Sands nodded. "Nobody here but you, Charlie?"

"Nobody but me and Arch," the old puncher replied. "Chris took the rest of the crew out toward the badlands after he brought in the body."

"A lot of good they'll do."

"No chance of catching that bunch, eh?"

"Not now. Later, maybe."

"Somebody ought to pay for Ben's getting killed."

"Yeah," said Sands. "And I've a hunch it shouldn't be Russ Nolan."

He went to the cookshack and Arch dished up a meal consisting of stew, biscuits and coffee. None of the Circle-S riders came in while he was eating. He rolled and lighted a smoke, crossed to the ranchhouse. Claire Singleton came to the door when he knocked. She said, "Oh, it's you, Sands," and smiled as though she were glad to see him. "Come in, Sands."

He entered, removed his hat, asked, "Laurie around?"

"No. She's been coming and going all day."

"You don't know where she is now?"

"Hardly. Who knows where Laurie rides?"

"She knows that her father is after Russ Nolan?"

Claire shrugged. "Perhaps," she said. "She's all upset about this crazy business." She turned and entered the living room, and Sands followed.

He watched her curl up in a corner of the big sofa in front of the fireplace. There was something feline about her at times; he did think of a sleek, green-eyed cat as he watched her. He flung his cigarette into the fire, faced her, and said, "There's hell to pay on this range."

"Rustling is nothing new. Or so I'm told."

"No. And murder isn't new either. Still . . ."

"And Russ Nolan is to blame for the rustling and the murder?"

"I don't think so," Sands said. "Do you?"

She shrugged. "I know so little about it."

"You know that John Singleton hates Russ. And why."

Claire frowned. "I know," she said. "And it's senseless. If Russ hasn't stolen Circle S cattle and didn't kill Ben Lacey, it's senseless." She met Sands' gaze. "I never had the slightest personal interest in Russ Nolan," she added. "That you'll have to believe. If he's in trouble now because of me, I'm sorry."

"A lot of people believe you were interested in him."

"A lot of people can be mistaken."

Sands stared at her, bewildered. He said lately, "If you were my wife, I'd get the truth out of you before I would end half-crazed as John Singleton has done. There must be a way for a man to handle you."

Claire smiled faintly. "There is a way," she said. "And I'm sure you'd find it, Sands. But John Singleton isn't you."

"He was a good man — once."

"Before he married me?"

"I don't know what changed him, what softened him. Maybe it was you. Maybe it was his becoming rich, and not having to fight to live from day to day. Whatever is to blame, he shouldn't have let it turn him soft."

"You'll never get soft, will you?" she said as though thinking aloud. "I like you, Sands. I like you because in some ways you're a lot like me."

"Is that something you told Russ Nolan?" he asked. "When you rode out to the horse camp to see him, even when you had no personal interest in him?"

"No, I didn't tell him anything like that," she replied, a shadow in her eyes and her voice grave. "I finally saw through Russ. When I first came here, I kept hearing about how tough and wild Russ Nolan was; about how he could whip any man in the Circle-S crew — in fact, any man in the Pipestem country; about how he'd shot up Rawlins when he went on a drunk and started brawls. I found that there wasn't anything he wouldn't do. It was all talk, as I soon discovered. I thought you would be another Russ Nolan when John told me he was waiting for you. But you're different. I can see through you as I did through Russ."

"Look," said Sands, "what did you want of Russ?"

"Something he was too weak to do," Claire said.

"What was it?"

"Something you're not too weak to do, Sands."

"Go on."

She smiled again, without amusement. "I'm not so sure you'd do it. Not yet, anyway. You're against me, Sands. You resist me because I'm John's wife. How can I be sure that I dare try to bargain with you? You're his man and you might go to him with what I say." She paused, looked directly into his eyes. "When you're even a little my man, let me know. If I ever begin to get under your skin, Sands, come to me and we'll make a bargain. Do you understand me?"

He wondered if he did. She wanted him to want her, and when he did want her, he would have to pay for her. The price would be high. What sort of price tag could a woman like this place on herself, he wondered.

"I think I understand," he said. "You want a man killed."

"You're discerning, Sands," she told him. "But not killed if there is another way to get rid of him."

"Henderson?"

"Why Henderson?"

"It's got to be him," Sands said. "You knew him in Chicago. He's got a hold on you." He frowned at her. "He followed you here. Who is he?" Her face was expressionless now, but she was far less calm than she looked. He could see alarm in her eyes. "Or maybe it's not Henderson you want to be rid of. Maybe his hold on you isn't what you led Laurie to believe. I'm no back country cowpoke, Mrs. Singleton. I'm no Russ Nolan. I've come up against rigged deals before, and this sure looks rigged. Henderson is more your kind of man than John Singleton is, and maybe that's the answer to the whole crazy business."

"Sands —" Claire said thickly, her voice sounding the alarm in her eyes. "If you believe just a thing . . ."

"You've been meeting Henderson secretly," he went on. "But I don't think he's come all the way from Chicago just on the chance of having you drop out in a ditch or some lonely spot like the Old Homestead. He's got something bigger, a man like him. A man who knows that he wouldn't have to leave Chicago to find some woman like you. The biggest thing around these parts is the Circle S, and if Henderson should have his eye on that . . . Well, it could be worth it."

Claire was no longer a sleek, indolent cattle queen. She

got from the sofa, faced him, and there was a wild look in her eyes. "Sands, you fool!" she cried. "I thought you had more sense. I thought you could be of some use to me!"

"Not a chance!"

"It's not like you think!"

"So you say," he said harshly. "But I'm beginning to see the picture: Henderson throwing in with Clayton, and Clayton bossing a bunch of rustlers who make off with Circle-S beef. Robbing John Singleton, hurting him where it hurts a rancher most. Get some of his own crew in on it — which I'd swear has been done — build it up, make it a fight between Singleton and the rustlers. Then rig it so that Singleton gets a bullet in the back and blame the rustlers."

"Sands, please —"

"You deny that Henderson may want Circle-S?"

"I don't know that he does, Sands!"

"So you say," he told her again. Then: "So Singleton ends up finally killed. Supposedly by rustlers. But all the while there's a plot to steal Circle-S. Once you're a widow, you'll have a widow's claim to Circle-S. And since Henderson is your kind of man, you'll marry him and — for practical purposes — Circle-S is his."

Claire said thickly, "You believe that, do you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think I do."

"And you'll tell John?"

"It's time somebody tells him that he's being played for a fool."

"All right, Sands," Claire said despairingly. "Maybe you'll tell him. Maybe you will. But I don't think he'll believe a word of it. Not —" her face turned ugly with hatred for him. "not when I'm through with you!"

He didn't understand what she had in her mind. He could see no way that she could distract him in Singleton's eyes. He heard, as did the seven riders coming into the ranch yard. And at the sound, he saw her expression change. The look of fury was gone, and now she merely appeared determined to carry out some course suddenly decided upon. He wasn't prepared for what she planned. He couldn't have stopped her, anyway.

She reached up both hands and began to tear the combs

and pins from her auburn hair. When her hair was loosened, she deliberately dishevelled it. She caught hold of the collar of her dress, ripped at it violently, tore the bodice open to the waist and bared the whole of one shoulder. She laughed at Sands' astonished expression, laughed wildly, then leapt at him. Her attack was too swift for him to fend her off. Her right hand clawed, the nails scratched deep into his left cheek. And she began to scream.

She was still screaming when one man and then a second hit the veranda running. They came rushing into the house, Singleton calling his wife's name. She was cowering when Singleton came running into the room, cowering back from Ed Sands. She screamed again as though her hysteria were uncontrollable. Sands stood on the spot he'd held when she attacked him, motionless, too taken aback to move or to speak. She'd drawn blood with her fingernails. There were four bleeding gashes across his cheek.

Singleton strode to her, caught her up in his arms. She sagged against him. She was a good actress; Sands had to admit it. She was trembling, gasping. She buried her face against her husband's shoulder, and she began to whimper like a frightened child. Singleton's face was pale, stiff. He said, his voice thick with rage, "Get out. You've got as much start as ten minutes will give you – then I'm coming after you. Get out!"

Sands said, "All right, John. This is something I can't fight."

He turned, strode toward the doorway to the hall, where Matt Hagarthy stood with a twisted smile on his thin lips. Hagarthy stepped back into the hall to let Sands pass, and Sands saw a glint of something dangerous in the man's murky eyes. He passed Hagarthy, then swung back fast and caught the ranch boss drawing his gun. He had his hat in his hand, and he struck Hagarthy in the face with it. Hagarthy tried to duck, but he was a trifle too slow. Sands slammed into him, bodily, drove a knee to his groin, and Hagarthy's face convulsed with pain. Sands said bitterly, "I had somebody shoot at me from behind once today, and once is enough."

He backed a step. Then, with Hagarthy dropping his gun and doubling over his pain, he drove a fist into the man's

face. Hagarthy was falling to the floor as he turned away, falling heavily and loosely.

Three Circle-S riders were across by the corrals, sitting their horses and peering toward the house. One called, "Sands! What's going on in there?"

Sands crossed the veranda, descended the steps without answering. He strode to his horse, caught up its reins, and Hagarthy began to yell as he swung to the saddle. He headed across the yard as Hagarthy appeared in the doorway. The ramrod was still bent over and holding his groin with both hands. Sands heard him yell something, then he lifted his horse to a run. Behind him Hagarthy shouted orders at the three Circle-S hands and they started after Sands.

It was a wild flight, but Sands had no other choice. Singleton would come after him, and then it would be kill or be killed. He couldn't blame Singleton; the man had reacted as any man would have under the circumstances.

He had the darkness in his favor, and a fresh mount. He kept the animal running, and when he looked back he could see nothing of his pursuers. After perhaps a mile he slowed the horse to an easier pace and shortly reined in to listen. He heard them somewhere in the darkness to the east of him. He swung west at an easy lope for a couple miles. When he halted again to listen, he heard nothing of the three.

He was safe for the moment, for so long as darkness lasted. It would be a different matter when daylight came. He knew that he should hole-up somewhere, find a hide-out. He memory-sketched the surveyor's map, and the most likely place for a hunted man seemed to be the badlands. But there was a better place, Sands realized: The Lost Squaw's deep gorge.

He rode many a twisted mile during the night: circling about, back-tracking, and using his trail. Then, in the gray dawn, he found a descent into the gorge. It was a treacherous descent slanting down a rocky wall to the chasm bottom, and he was forced to lead his horse and move slowly. The crashing roar of the water thundered about him, and a mist rose from the crashing stream and reached him before he gained the rocky ledge of the base of the steep wall. The ledge was

occasionally wide enough to have taken a wagon and team, could a rig have been gotten down there; then at other times it was barely wide enough for a horse to traverse.

Following it south Sands bore away from where the cataract tumbled and boomed. He made his way around a bend, and there the gorge widened and the stream was less wild. The ledge widened to a shelf beneath the overhanging wall, a shelf about fifty feet across and perhaps a hundred long. There was some grass and quite a growth of brush, enough to keep a horse for a few days. Sands gave no thought to what he would do for food for himself.

Sands off-saddled the gray, had a smoke, then wrapped himself in the saddle blanket and lay down to sleep. He thought as he drifted off to sleep that now he knew how Russ Nolan had felt at Crimp's Place as he made his getaway. He knew now what it was like to be framed and hunted.

Hunger came late in the day, an emptiness at first and then a constant gnawing. Sands drank, but a bellyful of water did not lessen the pangs of hunger. He smoked at intervals, until his tobacco sack was empty. He drew his belt tighter. The day was long. He watched the sunlight fade from the gorge and dusk close in. He waited until nearly dark before leaving his hide-out.

Once out of the gorge, he mounted the gray and headed at a walk toward the Circle-S horse camp. There was food in the cabin, and it might be that no one had been sent to take Ben Luray's place. If his luck held, he would eat tonight. If not . . . Sands refused to worry about even the immediate future. In his fix, a man made his plans as the need for plans arose.

He rode warily, halted occasionally to listen. There were no sounds but the far-off howling of a coyote and, nearer at hand, the shrill cry of some night bird. The feeling was right, too; he felt that he had the hills to himself.

The horse camp was another matter.

Lamplight glowed from the cabin window.

Sands swore under his breath, reined in, and peered at the patch of light. His first impulse was to turn back. His second, based on hunger, drove him on. He drifted toward the cabin,

finally dismounted in a clump of scrub alders, tethered his horse. He went on afoot; then a hundred yards from the cabin he flattened to the ground and waited.

He waited an hour, longer, and then the lamp or lantern, whichever it was, went out. A man came to the doorway, stood looking out. A match flared, was lifted to a pipe, and Sands made out the leathery face of old Charlie Wall.

He rose slightly, and called, "Charlie!"

The match was extinguished.

Charlie called, "Sands . . . ?"

"Yeah. You alone?"

"Sure. Come on in."

Sands heaved a sigh of relief, rose, walked toward the cabin. When he was close, he heard Charlie Wall chuckle. The old man said, "Singleton posted me here to watch out for you. He didn't say what I was to do if you showed up, and I'm the kind of hired hand that needs careful orders. Where in hell have you been holed up, Sands? They've been fine-combing the whole Pipestem country for you."

Sands didn't say where he had been holed up. "I'm about starved," he said. "I've got to have some grub, Charlie."

"Plenty here. I'll fill a flour sack for you."

"Some tobacco, too."

"Sure. Coming in?"

"No. I'll wait here."

Charlie went inside, made a light, gathered the grub, then, after putting out the light, came to the doorway with a bulging sack that he handed to Sands.

"Singleton would shoot me for this, the temper he's in," he said. "But he won't know. Sands, I've taken a liking to you — which is more than I can say about a lot of folks on Snake-in-the-Hole — and I figure you're a square-shooter, and —"

Sands broke in, "Even after what happened between me and Singleton's wife, Charlie?"

The old man snorted. "That woman! Friend, I can't see her screaming bloody-murder when a man tries to lay a hand on her. It was more to it than your trying to get gay with her. Ain't that so?"

"You're right, Charlie."

"Yeah. And Singleton is a damn' fool where that woman's concerned."

"She's got him where she wants him."

"I'm going to give you some advice," Charlie said. "Start riding. Ride all night. Hole up all day tomorrow. Ride all tomorrow night. Keep that up until you're a thousand miles from here!"

Sands set the sack on the ground, fished around in it until he found the tobacco. He took a packet of papers from his pocket, started fashioning a cigarette.

He said, after lighting his cigarette, "I'm not finished around here, Charlie. I've dealt myself in on this crazy game, and I aim to play it through to the finish."

"You don't know the whole of it, Sands."

"What's the whole of it?"

"Singleton has offered a bounty for your hide."

"Oh?"

"For yours and for Russ Nolan's," Charlie said. "A thousand dollars each."

Sands dragged hard on his cigarette. "That's a lot of money, Charlie."

"Yeah. And everybody and his brother will be out trying to collect. It's the kind of money that makes men go in for bushwhacking. If you and Russ don't head for a healthier climate . . . Well, it'll be just too bad."

Sands picked up the sack, slung it over his shoulder. "Well, thanks for the grub and the advice, partner," he said. "I'll be obliged to you if you do one thing more for me."

"Name it, Sands."

"Tell the girl for me," Sands said. "Laurie, I mean. Tell her that I never touched that woman. Will you do that, Charlie?"

"Sure."

Sands said, "Thanks," and turned away.

He got off the train at Rawlins, a gawky youth with pale blue eyes that bulged and buck teeth that showed through a vacant smile. He shouldered a disreputable looking saddle, but the rifle in the saddle's scabbard was shiny new. He wore the usual range clothes, plus a brown corduroy coat that was

spotted in spots and faded in larger patches. Beneath the coat, he wore a gun-rig and the gun in the holster was a .38 caliber Colt.

He ate dinner at the hotel, then sat on the porch steps and smoked a cigarette. He finally rose and shouldered his saddle, headed back along the street toward the livery stable near the railroad. He hired a horse, a black mare, and paid a deposit to the liveryman who, not liking his looks, demanded one. Apparently, he was a youth who didn't argue with his elders.

He saddled the mare, rose to the saddle, then asked, "Crimp's Place?"

Getting directions from the liveryman, Bucky Hogan rode from the stable and, heading through town, took the west road. He rode deep in the saddle, his gawky body loose jointed. He didn't look like much of a horseman.

He didn't look like much of anything. Certainly, he didn't look like a killer by trade. . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FOUR Circle-S riders left Crimp's Place as it grew dark. They crossed the bridge, then took the road that ran north through the Bench. They weren't calling off the search for Russ Nolan and Ed Sands because of darkness. If they had been calling it a day, Kate Crimp knew, they would have taken the east road which was a shorter way to Circle-S.

They'd eaten supper at Crimp's, and now Kate cleared the table. She carried the dirty dishes back to the kitchen where, with the kid Andy's help, she washed them. There was a kettle of stew keeping warm on the cookstove, in anticipation of more hungry riders. And, the dishes done, Kate refilled the big coffee pot and placed it on the stove. She worked in silence until young Andy said, "You think they'll catch Russ and that Sands hombre, Kate?"

"They'll catch them sooner or later," Kate said, "and that'll be too bad."

"Too bad?" The boy looked surprised. "Why? Ain't they bad ones?"

"Don't believe all you hear, Andy."

"No, ma'm. But . . ."

"Russ Nolan is all right except for his drinking," Kate told him. "As for Sands . . . Well, I think he's all right, too."

Kate finished in the kitchen and went through the barroom. She stepped out onto the porch where her husband, his arm still in a sling, sat in a rocking chair. He had a tin cup of whiskey on his left hand. He was muttering to himself. A huge, blood-red moon was rising in the southeast. Kate could see the lighted windows of a squatter place far across the Bench. The night was warm, but Kate shivered.

Crimp said, "Damn' fools. Chasing around like they're really going to catch something. Both Nolan and Sands are too smart for that crowd."

"Smart or not," Kate said, "they can't stay holed up forever."

"A lot you know."

"I know they'll catch those two."

"Russ, maybe. If he starts drinking again. But not Sands."

"They'll catch them both," Kate said. "But not before there's a lot more trouble, with you in the middle of it. You think Russ Nolan will forget that we lied about him? As for Sands, he's already warned you."

Crimp snorted, lifted his tin-cup. He didn't drink this time, however, but leaned forward in his rocker and listened intently. "Rider coming," he said, after a long moment. He set the tin cup on the porch floor, reached for the shotgun leaning against the wall. He steadied the gun with his right hand, thumbed back the hammers with his left. Kate heard the rider now. He was coming in from the east road, holding his horse to a walk. Shod hoofs thudded against the bridge, and Kate, seeing the rider now as a shady figure, was sure she knew who it was. She shuddered.

He rode a black horse, and he slumped liked an old man in the saddle. He avoided the light from the windows and the open doorway, then, reining in, asked, "This Crimp's Place?"

Crimp exclaimed, "Bucky! By damn! Bucky Hogan!"

The rider chuckled. "Didn't expect me so soon, eh, Will?" He dismounted, came up onto the porch. He saw Kate now, swerved toward her. He said, "Hello, babe," and tried to

put his arm about her. He laughed when she shied away, then turned to Crimp.

Crimp had eased the shotgun off cocked, and now rose. He shook hands with Bucky Hogan, who said, "A long time no see. How's it going, partner?"

"A good business here, Bucky. But for one thing."

"What's the deal?"

"I need you to take care of a man for me, Bucky."

"Can do," Bucky Hogan said. "If the pay is good."

Kate laughed mirthlessly. "Why worry about being paid?" she said. "Money will do you no good once you tangle with that Ed Sands!"

The second day in his hide-out was better than the first for Sands. He wasn't tormented by hunger. And a patient man could content himself most anywhere when his belly was full. He had plenty of patience, and he knew hunters usually ran out of patience before their game. He felt secure in the Lost Gorge. He wondered if Russ Nolan had found as good a place in which to hole up.

It was mid-day when his sense of security was shattered. He glimpsed a movement among the rocks back along the ledge leading to his camp on the shelf. He got his rifle, took cover behind a boulder, and his finger was on the trigger when he recognized the approaching figure.

It was Laurie Singleton.

Alarm was still with him, and he stared at her in a stunned way. He hadn't expected anyone to find a way into the gorge, or even to think of looking for him there. Laurie picked her way along a narrow part of the ledge, and was close before he recovered from his shock and stepped forward to meet her. She was flushed, breathing hard. Her hat hung at her shoulders by its chin strap, as it did so much of the time, and her hair was tousled. Her smile came as she saw him, and she began to hurry.

Sands called, "Watch your step."

A misstep anywhere along the ledge would have thrown her into the wild current, but she was cat footed. She gained the shelf without mishap, looked about Sands' hide-out camp, and said, "How did you ever get a horse down here?"

"The important thing is," he replied, "how did you think to look down here?"

"I tried to think like you. I kept asking myself where I would hide out if I were him. And I hit on the gorge." She laughed. "Don't worry. Only people like you and I would think of risking our necks to come down into this crazy place."

"I'm not so sure now."

"I've never heard of anyone but myself trying it – other than you, of course."

"So now you've satisfied your curiosity?"

"Don't be nasty, my friend. I thought you might need some grub. I brought some in my saddlebags. They're back along the ledge."

"Well, thanks."

She looked up at him with her eyes narrowed. "Take that chip off your shoulder, Ed," she said. "You've got no quarrel with me. I'm on your side."

"Why are you?"

"Shouldn't I be?"

"After what's happened," he said flatly, "no."

Laurie was silent a long moment, gazing up at him, studying him. "Why did you do it, Ed?" she said finally. "Why did you have to pick her, of all women?"

"You believe that I tried that?"

"Well, didn't you?"

"I'll be damned," Sands said.

Laurie laughed. "I'm just riding you, Ed," she said. "Take that shocked look off your face. If I believed such a thing of you, I wouldn't have come looking for you. Besides I stopped at the horse camp and Charlie Wall told me what you asked him to tell me. It was important that I be told, wasn't it, Ed? It was very important to you, wasn't it?"

"It's important to me that you don't think the worst of me."

"Why, Ed?"

"I guess you know why."

She smiled and came close and looked up at him. Her hand stole into his. Then he kissed her and he scarcely heard the rushing water far below.

Restlessness grew in Sands the third day, and at noon he saddled his horse and led it away from his camp. He made the precarious climb up the gorge wall, then mounted and rode from through the brush and scrub trees. He headed south through the hills, in the general direction of Crimp's Place, but he traveled warily. He saw no signs of riders until he reached a timbered ridge overlooking the squatters' part of the Bench. Then, he sighted four horsemen heading north through the valley at an easy lope.

He watched them until they headed into the hills rimming the Bench to the east; then, keeping to the timber, he continued south. He looked down upon the buildings at Crimp's Place an hour later, and made out three saddled horses standing before the main building.

He reined in and had a smoke, waiting for the owners of the horses to leave the place. He had some idea of riding down there, once the riders were gone, though he doubted that he could get any information from Crimp, even by force. When the three men came out and mounted, they headed west toward the ridge where Sands sat his horse. He watched them for a time and finally, when they didn't change their course, he turned back north.

If he had needed proof that he was being manhunted, he had it now.

The two bunches of riders he'd seen could have no other reason for riding the Bench. They were manhunting either him or Russ Nolan. Or both. . . .

Laurie made sure that she was not followed after she left the Circle-S horse camp where she had talked briefly with old Charlie Wall. She headed into the hills, found her way to the brush-grown rim of the gorge, dismounted, and tethered her horse. She located the descent, but paused before starting down, gripped by a sudden unease.

It was nothing tangible. She had the feeling that she was being watched, but when she looked around she could see nothing but the dense tangle of brush and scrub trees. She started down the rocky gorge wall, the roar of the Lost Squaw thundering about her. She hurried along the ledge, eager to see Ed Sands. She had the need to feel his arms about her

again. But beyond her need, she had news for him. The sheriff had arrived at Circle-S and given her hope that somehow Sands would be able to come from hiding.

Her heart skipped a beat when she found the shelf empty. Then she saw that though Sands wasn't there, his bedroll remained. She knew that he would return. She took his neatly rolled blankets from the rock where he had left them, and spread them out. She sank down onto them, removed her hat, loosened her hair, and stretched out. The water gave off no booming roar here, but its steady murmur was for Laurie, as she relaxed, much like a lullaby. She closed her eyes, and thought how silly it was to be drowsy in the middle of the afternoon.

She let herself go, telling herself that he would be there with her when she woke. . . . She woke with a start, but the man who stood there staring down at her was not Ed Sands. It was not any man she had ever seen before and alarm lifted her. Quickly she stood up.

He reached out, struck her a blow with the flat of his hand against her shoulder. A scream gathered in her throat but got no farther. Her throat was constricted by her fright.

He said, "Where is he?"

She couldn't answer.

He said, "Where's Sands? Where's he gone?"

He was smiling, only it wasn't a genuine smile. He had buck teeth so large that his lips didn't fit over them easily, and so he wore a perpetual empty grimace. He was a homely, gawky youth. He wasn't the sort of person Laurie would have feared ordinarily, but she sensed that his appearance had nothing to do with what he really was. Fear was a sudden sickness in her.

Her throat opened. She managed to say chokingly, "I — I don't know what you mean. I don't know anybody named —"

"Don't lie to me. Nobody lies to me. You know who I am?"

"I —"

"Me," he boasted. "I'm Bucky Hogan!" He saw the look of horror in her eyes. "Know me, do you? Heard of me, eh?"

She nodded dumbly. Bucky Hogan, a man with a gun for hire, a paid killer; Bucky Hogan of the range wars; Bucky

Hogan who posed as a range detective, and so gave his killings an aura of semi legality. Yes, she and everybody else in the cattle country had heard of Bucky Hogan. She shuddered.

"Where's Sands gone?"

"I don't know."

"You his girl?" he demanded. Then, not waiting for an answer: "Sure, you are. Saw you riding through the hills and watching your back-trail, and I figured you'd be going to a man who was hiding out." He looked about the shelt, his vacant grin spreading. "Cozy here. A nice way for a man to hide out." He looked back at Laurie, leered at her. "Well, he'll be back. He'll come back for you. No use my hunting him when I can wait for him to come to me."

Laurie sat up, looked wildly about the camp.

There was no weapon, she knew even as she looked for one. Sands wouldn't have left either his revolver or rifle behind.

Bucky Hogan lounged against a boulder, rolled and lighted a cigarette, his gaze never leaving her. "You're a looker," he said finally. "How does this Sands hombre rate you?"

She looked at him, forced herself to look at him. He seemed like an overgrown boy. *Keep him talking,* she told herself. *Distract him.* Ed Sands would surely come soon, and if this creature could be caught off guard . . . Laurie tried to collect her wits, tried to find words to hold not just his gaze but his whole attention upon her.

She said, "I guess I knew they'd get him in the end."

"Yeah. You should have known Bucky Hogan would get him."

"I didn't know they sent for you."

"Maybe," he said, chuckling at his own humor, "they should have told you."

"Well, I would have quit him before now if I'd known."

"What's held you to him? He got some money?"

Laurie shook her head. "Not much," she said. She gave him a searching look. "How much money will you get for killing him?"

"What do you care?"

"Well, I thought . . ."

Bucky Hogan chuckled again. "You thought you'd like some of Bucky's money, eh?" he said. "Where ain't there a woman that thinks like that?" He thrust a hand into the pocket of his corduroy coat, brought out an untidy roll of bills. "Two hundred there," he told her. "I collect three hundred more once the job is done. You like that kind of money, sweetheart?"

"What makes you think you'll be able to collect the three hundred?"

"Nobody welshes on Bucky Hogan."

"You don't know the people on this range."

"I know Will Crimp. He'll pay up – or it'll be too bad for him."

"Oh, Crimp," said Laurie. "So he brought you here?"

"Yeah. He's an old friend of mine," Bucky said, returning the money to his pocket. "He's all right, Crimp is."

"He's not paying you enough. Five hundred isn't enough to go up against a man like Sands. You're taking a big chance, Bucky. Didn't Crimp tell you what Sands is like?"

"Crimp's woman let on that he was plenty tough."

"He's tough and smart, and good with a gun, Bucky."

Bucky Hogan thought that over, the smoking cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth. His attention seemed wholly with her, and Laurie forced herself not to look out along the ledge for Sands' coming.

Bucky nodded, "When will he get back?"

Laurie felt a sudden hope. "Not for a while," she said. "About sundown, he said." She was talking too fast now, too excitedly. "Better have a talk with him, Bucky. Get the drop on him, sure. But have a talk with him. "You'll get more out of it by letting him live than by killing him for Crimp."

"But he won't be here until sundown?"

"No."

"That gives you and me time to get acquainted, don't it?"

"What – What do you mean?"

Bucky said, "What do you think I mean, sweetheart." He tossed his cigarette into the creek, moved toward her with an exaggerated swagger.

Laurie jumped to her feet. She wanted to run, but there was no place to run to except the ledge. And even if she got

past him and reached the ledge, there was the danger of a misstep that would throw her into the turbulent water. She backed away from him, and felt her throat straining to scream. But no sound came. She backed into a boulder, and he caught her before she could slip away from it. His hands closed on her shoulders, pressed her against the rock. Then Laurie, looking wildly about, saw Ed Sands.

Bucky Hogan must have seen some change in her expression, for he halted and grew rigid. Laurie saw the wildness fade from his eyes, and it seemed to her that he was suddenly alert in an animal-like way. Fear for herself was gone now, but fear for Ed replaced it. She had to keep this killer from turning in Ed's direction; she must keep him from using his gun on Ed. He was puzzled by the change in her, and suspicious. His right hand moved toward the gun by his thigh. If only she could hold him a moment longer. . . .

She said in desperation, "You don't have to hurt me, Bucky. Look —"

Her trembling fingers fumbled at the buttons of her shirt. He muttered something incoherent, and came at her, aware of her and of nothing else in the world.

Ed Sands moved recklessly along the treacherous ledge and gained the shelf. His gun was in his hand. Laurie leaped to the side, eluded the reaching hands. She thrust out her own hands, struck Bucky Hogan on the chest, reeled him backwards. And she screamed at last, screamed, "Kill him, Ed! Kill him!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

SANDS saw how it was when he came along the ledge, and rage drove him forward without letting him consider the dangerous footing. He saw how Laurie held the man's attention upon her, giving him, Sands, the moment he needed to get close enough to shoot. He swung his gun up as the man swung around, and he recognized Bucky Hogan at once. There was a wicked eagerness in him as he squeezed the trigger, and he all but yelled with wild glee as Hogan staggered under the impact of the slug.

He [illegible] staggered, but he didn't go down. He had drawn

his gun, and now fired a wild shot. Sands cocked his gun, leaded the bushwhacker. He saw the terrified look that came suddenly into Bucky Hogan's eyes. He heard Hogan scream – not like a human, but like a terrorized animal – and saw him whip around and run. There was no place to run to, but Hogan ran. He ran straight off the shelf, plunged into the rushing water of the Lost Squaw. He went under, bobbed up, and he screamed again as he broke surface. Sands watched Bucky Hogan fight the current with a savage thrashing, but it dragged him along and spun him one way and another as though he were but a lifeless bit of driftwood. And in less than a minute he was gone from Sands' sight, swept downstream.

She was crying when Sands went to her. He said, "Laurie, Laurie," and gathered her into his arms. He tried to comfort, but was clumsy at it. He could only hold her to him and wait until she got herself under control. It was a long time before she stopped sobbing, much longer until she stopped trembling. He drew her down onto blankets then and held her close.

"It's over," he kept saying. "It's all right."

"Ed, if you hadn't come . . ."

"Don't think about it, Laurie."

They were silent and very still for a long time. Then Laurie said, "Ed, it was Crimp. Crimp brought him in and paid him to kill you."

"Crimp? You're sure?"

"He told me."

"That's something," Sands said. "It's just what I needed to know."

They talked a little more, Laurie telling him that the sheriff had arrived at Circle-S. She seemed to think that the coming of the law was the solution to everything would be, and that Sands had only to come in from hiding and tell the sheriff what he knew – what he suspected – to end the whole tangled business. He tried to convince her that it was far from being so simple, and that until he had proof that there was a plot against her father he must stay out.

"But I've a hunch that I can get that proof," he said. "From Crimp. He's deeper in this thing than I guessed, else he

wouldn't have hired Hogan. I've got to get to Crimp and catch him alone. But right now I'm going to start you back to Circle-S."

She protested that it wasn't safe for him to leave the gorge, but he went with her. He had left his horse in the brush at the rim of the gorge, close to where Laurie's pinto was tethered. Not far off he found a black horse – Bucky Hogan's mount – and took it along as they rode through the hills. Its brand was a 2X, and Laurie said that it was a horse from the livery stable at Rawlins. Once close to Circle-S range, he off-saddled it and turned it loose.

He rode with her until they saw the Circle-S horse camp.

At sundown two squatter kids adventuring along the Lost Squaw sighted something in the water. The current was fairly swift at this point in the valley below the gorge, and the thing was swept along until it struck a riffle. It caught there on the sand-bar, in no more than a foot of water. One kid said, "Aw, it's just a log."

The other exclaimed, "Shucks, no! It's a man – a dead man!"

They beelined it for home, bare feet pounding.

They gasped out the story of their discovery to their sod-buster father, and he, after due consideration, hitched up a team to his farm wagon. He was more excited than he let on, for he believed that his sons had found the body of either Russ Nolan or Ed Sands. He knew about the reward Snake-in-the-Hole had offered for those two, and a thousand dollars was a lot of money.

It was hazy dusk when he fished the body out of the water. It was long past dark when he drove up to Crimp's Place. The bulky Crimp appeared in the doorway of the barroom as the farmer halted his team before the building, and said, "Traveling late, ain't you, Lafe?"

Lafe said, "Crimp, I've got a dead man here in my wagon. He's a stranger to me, so it ain't Russ Nolan. I know him. But I'm figuring it's maybe that Sands hombre. Fetch a light, will you?"

Crimp called to Kate, over his shoulder, and she came

with a glowing lamp. They came down from the porch, and Lafe pulled the tarpaulin off the body.

Lafe said, "I aim to have some of the reward Snake-in-the-Hole's offering."

He stared in bewilderment at Kate Crimp, for she began to laugh somewhat hysterically. "Sands?" she cried. "That's not Sands. That's Bucky Hogan, the man Crimp sent to kill Sands!"

Lafe's face fell. "You mean there ain't no reward for him?"

Will Crimp swore bitterly.

Kate laughed wildly.

Sands waited until darkness came before setting out for Crimp's Place. He passed close to several squatter places, their lamplighted windows jewel-bright. At one farm, a dog started a noisy racket that brought its master to the door of his shack with a rifle in the crook of his arm. Farther on two riders crossing a field called a challenge.

Sands reined in and called back, "Circle-S."

He held his breath and reached for his rifle, but the pair went on, one complaining loudly, "Snake-in-the-Hole! Hell, they're everywhere!" And Sands got the idea that they were a couple bounty-hungry men making a half-hearted search for him and Russ Nolan.

He came to the bridge, crossed it warily. The windows of Crimp's Place were yellow with lamplight. The blacksmith shop was dark, as was one of the shack houses opposite it. The other shack was lighted, and a ground-hitched horse stood before it. There were no horses at Crimp's hitch-rack. He swung off the bridge into a clump of trees, dismounted, left his horse with its reins trailing. Somebody came from the barn with a lantern, and Sands saw that it was the kid who had buried the hide on the Circle S steer. Sands went around the side of the store-saloon, intercepting the youth midway from the barn.

He said, "Quiet, son. Just stand where you are."

The glare of the lantern was in the boy's eyes, and they were suddenly as large as half-dollars. "Russ," he stammered. "Russ, is — is it you?"

"Sands, son. Keep your voice down and put out that light."

He moved closer once the lantern was blacked out. "What made you think it might be Russ Nolan?"

"I — I don't know. I guess I just expect him to show up."

"When did you see him last?"

"The day he got away from those Snake-in-the-Hole riders. I saw it all from the barn where Crimp told me to stay. I stayed hid until you rode out."

"Before that," Sands said, "when was it you saw Russ?"

"I — I ain't supposed to tell."

"Who said you're not to tell? Crimp?"

"Well . . . Yeah."

"Never mind Crimp. When was it, son?"

Sands could feel the boy's fear, saw him back away. He caught him by the arm and said, "I've got to know."

"Crimp'll take a whip to me if I tell!"

"No. He won't know you told me." He hardened his voice. "It's important, son. Important enough for me to get rough. Now don't make me ask you again." He could feel the boy tremble.

"It was that same day, early in the morning," the squatter kid said. "I always bed down in the barn. Well, Russ's horse was there when I came down from the loft. I went over to the kitchen to start the fire in the cookstove and make me some breakfast. Russ was sleeping in the barroom on a bench. Later on, he got his horse and rode out. Then you and those Snake-in-the-Hole riders brought him back. That's all I know. Honest."

Sands nodded. "It's enough," he said. "Now listen, there's going to be trouble around here. You keep out of it, so you don't get hurt. Get back to the barn and stay there, or better still light out for home. You savvy?"

The boy nodded jerkily, turned back toward the barn.

Sands went around to the front of the main building, mounted to the porch at the store side. There was among other merchandise on haphazard display on the porch a large barrel of coal oil. The barrel rested on a wooden stand and was fitted with a spigot. Sands opened the spigot and let the oil gush out onto the porch. He headed there for the barroom door. He shoved it open, stepped inside, and said flatly, "Stay where you are, Crimp!"

Crimp sat at a table with the blacksmith, an oldish man. His back was to the wall, and there was a shotgun against the wall and within reach of his hand. Crimp was too startled to grab for the weapon. Sands crossed, picked up the shotgun, carried it to the doorway, threw it out. He closed the door, stood with his back to it. Kate Crimp came in from the kitchen. She looked from Sands to her husband and said bitterly, "Well, you stupid ox, I told you he'd come."

Crimp's ruddy face took on a strangling look. He tried to lift his bulky person from the chair but couldn't make it. He said hoarsely, "Sands, listen—"

"That's what I'm here for," Sands replied. "To listen to you talk. It's time you talked. But, damn it, I want the truth. Why did you lie about Russ Nolan, Crimp? Why did you help frame him?"

"What's it to you, Sands?" Crimp said, a whining beggar. "There's nothing in it for you. You're done at Snake-in-the-Hole. Singleton's offered a bounty for you and—"

Sands cut in, "You just don't get the idea, friend." He glanced at Kate, who now stood against the bar, and said, "Maybe you can make him understand that I'm in no mood to fool around with him. He can't stand pain, but he's going to suffer plenty if he keeps clammed up."

Kate said, "Will, he means what he says."

"I—I don't know a thing."

"You know why you lied about Nolan."

"I didn't lie about him. I swear it!"

Sands swore under his breath. He drew his gun, moved toward the fat man. He brought the barrel down hard across the knuckles of Crimp's right hand. Crimp howled with pain, then gasped, "Sands—don't!" Sands lifted the gun again, threateningly. "You've got a sore shoulder, mister," he said. "I'm aiming for it next."

"Sands, for God's sake!"

"Let him be, Sands," Kate said. "He'll talk now." She came and stood beside her husband. "Don't be a fool, Will," she told him. "Save yourself. He's on to you, anyway. Tell him what he wants to know. Why cover up for the others? They wouldn't do it for you."

Crimp muttered, "All right. Russ was here that night. He

came back from the Circle-S party and bedded down here. I lied about it because I had orders that he was to be blamed for the rustling if there was a time when somebody had to be blamed."

"Go on," Sands ordered. "Keep talking."

"It wasn't my doings," Crimp said. "I never wanted any part of it. All I ever wanted was to be left alone. But they wouldn't leave me alone. Russ was picked for the goat from the start. He's the kind of man who can't stop with one drink. He had to keep on until he was dead drunk. So whenever a raid was made on Circle-S, his hands would start feeding him rotgut. Once he had a little likker in him, he'd need more, a lot more. So he'd come here. Then Tip Harmon and the others would go run off some Circle-S cattle. Russ didn't know what they were up to. Maybe he suspected it, but — well, there wasn't anything he could do."

"And Able Clayton's behind it?"

Crimp gave him a startled look.

Kate said, "Smart as well as tough. I told you, Will!"

Sands said, "Clayton set Russ up as a rancher in the badlands so that he'd have a base for the men doing the rustling. So Russ served two purposes. And Clayton gives you your orders?"

Crimp nodded and said despairingly, "I had to take orders from him, Sands. He helped me set up in business here. He put more money into the place than I did. He did it because — well, we're brothers. He changed his name a long time ago and," he sneered, "got to be what he calls respectable."

"Two fat men," Sands said. "I should have figured that."

"And they hate each other," Kate told him, "like only brothers can hate"

Sands looked at her. "Rustling is a two-bit game to a man like Clayton," he said. "When the money out of it has to be cut so many ways, anyway. What's Clayton's real game?"

"He never told Crimp," the woman replied. "But he wants the Bench. Or so I figure. Can't you see it? John Singleton may be rich, but he won't be rich forever if the rustling keeps up. Clayton is trying to get Singleton into a corner where he'll need money badly enough to sell the Bench at Clayton's price. Then Clayton will force the squatters to buy the

land they're on at a dozen times the cost to him per acre. If they can't pay, he'll clear them out and bring in other settlers who can pay. Why, he could divide the Bench up into five hundred farms. That's my idea of what his game is, Sands."

Sands nodded. "It could be. But I've a hunch Clayton is after still more."

Kate looked skeptical. "What more is there around here?"

"Circle-S. Snake-in-the-Hole."

"You think Clayton's after it?"

"I could be wrong. But I've a hunch Circle-S is Clayton's main goal."

"That's crazy," Kate said. "How could he swing it?"

"That's where Stace Henderson comes in," Sands told her. He looked back at Crimp, who was slumped dejectedly in his chair. The old blacksmith was puffing on his pipe and seeming not at all interested. Sands said, "Somebody at Circle-S is playing along with the rustlers. Who is it?"

"Tip Harmon has a brother at Circle-S."

"Yeah, Chris. Anybody else that might be mixed up it?"

It was Kate who answered, saying quickly. "Chris and his partner Pete Bixler. Nobody else, Sands."

He stared at her. "Not Matt Hagarthy, maybe?"

She stared back. "No, not Matt Hagarthy."

He wondered about that for a moment, remembering that on another visit he caught Kate Crimp showing more than a little interest when the name Matt Hagarthy was mentioned. It was possible that the woman was friendly enough with Hagarthy to want to cover up for him. He said finally, "All right, Kate. Now you go get what you want to take with you."

Crimp looked up sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"I told you that I'd come back and burn you out if I found out that you were mixed up in the rustling," Sands said flatly. "I found that out. And I found out too, friend, that you sent Bucky Hogan gunning for me!"

It wasn't something Crimp could argue with. Sands' discovery that he had sent Bucky Hogan. No doubt the thought occurred to Will Crimp that he was being let off with light punishment. Another man, one less charitable than Sands, might have made the punishment a bullet through

Crimp's thick body. He kept silent, sitting slumped in his chair. The blacksmith helped Kate bring down a Saratoga trunk. The woman made another trip upstairs, came down with a pair of shoes, a hat and a coat for her husband. She was also carrying a shabby valise and a reticule. She took the money from the till in the store, put it in her reticule, then said, "All right." She seemed not at all unhappy about leaving the place. "Hank," she said to the blacksmith, "go hitch up the wagon for us."

Crimp had changed his carpet slippers for shoes and now rose and put on his hat and coat. He looked about bleakly, then walked from the building. Sands followed, turned along the porch. The coal oil from the barrel formed a wide puddle across the end of the porch. He took out a match, struck it, dropped it into the oil. The coal oil began to burn with a blue flame. The fire spread, and the flames, leaping high, changed from blue to a lurid yellow.

Once the wood began to burn, there was a roar and a crackle, and the flames raced along the porch and up the front wall of the building. The fiery glare pushed back the darkness. Two women and a man came running from the nearer shack, the man bawling as he started to run, "Fire! Crimp — Fire!" It was the Circle-S hand, Chris Harmon.

Crimp had been standing with his back to the burning building, the whole of him drooping dejectedly. But now he whirled, cat-quick, yelled, "Watch it, Chris! It's Sands!"

Sands grabbed for his gun as Chris came to an abrupt stop, pulling his gun, but Crimp, with a courage he'd never shown before, slammed into Sands from behind and knocked him off balance. Harmon's fire shot was wide of its mark, for Sands was a reeling, moving target. His second shot came closer, close enough for Sands, not yet recovering his balance, to hear the whine of the slug. Harmon swore with anger on the second miss and now steadied his gun for another try. Sands was sideways to him and brought his revolver up across in front of himself. But before he could fire, another gun opened up — blasting once, twice, and a third time from alongside the building — and Chris Harmon, hit each time, seemed to dance a grotesque jig as his body jerked under the impact of the slugs.

The jig ended almost as soon as it began, with Harmon crumpling to the ground. Sands faced the corner of the building and saw Russ Nolan round it. Nolan had his gun in his hand, and he went to look down at the man he had shot.

He was cold sober tonight, and he looked as taut as a drawn bowstring. His face was haggard, badly in need of a razor, and Sands saw, in the glare of the fire, that the left corner of Nolan's mouth kept twitching. The man's eyes were feverish bright. He looked up at Sands and bared his teeth in a mirthless grin.

"He sure was hell bent for killing you, eh, Sands?"

"Yeah. And he came close to doing it."

"I came in tonight to get me a Crimp," Nolan said, a hint of his old buoyancy in his voice, "and I get me a Harmon. A damn' cattle-stealing Harmon. Well, I'll still get me that Crimp. Where is he, Sands?"

Sands swung about, saw Kate but not her husband.

She eyed him unconcernedly and said, "He started running as soon as he gave you that shove, Sands. And he picked up his shotgun when he started out."

Nolan said, "That fat son running? He sure won't run far." He broke open his gun, punched out the fired shells, then reloaded it with cartridges from his belt. "You set fire to his place, Sands?"

"Yeah."

"I'd have probably got around to doing it if you hadn't. Coming?"

"No. He's all yours."

"Why? What ails you friend? He's one of them. Don't you know that?"

"I know it and nothing ails me," Sands told him. "But I'm not going to have a hand in making Kate a widow. Go after him if you've got to. Nobody's stopping you."

Nolan gave him a half-puzzled, half-disgusted look and went around the building toward the barn. Kate said, "So that's it, Sands. I've been wondering why you let him off so easy. He's no bargain as a husband, but -- Well, thanks." She came closer to him. "Listen, friend, you're tough and you're smart, but that soft streak in you will trip you up in

the end. If Will Crimp had any guts, he would have emptied that shotgun into your back when he picked it up. The next man you are so easy on is apt to do just that."

"I'll keep your warning in mind," Sands said and turned away from her.

He mounted his horse, there in the clump of trees, then looked back at the building. The entire front wall was a mass of flames. Dense black smoke was pulling skyward. Russ Nolan yelled from somewhere around back, his words drowned out by the roar and crackle of the fire. A moment later he came into view, mounted and riding hard. He aimed for the bridge and shouted when he sighted Sands, "Riders coming!"

Sands swung after him, and they racketed across the Lost Squaw's plank bridge.

They kept to the east road for a half mile or more, then pulled up. The sky was ruddily aglow with the glare of the fire. Russ Nolan said, "I'll get him. I'll get that Crimp." He cursed Crimp until he ran out of obscenities. Then: "Why'd you burn him out?"

Sands said, "I promised him I'd do it, the first time I talked to him. I warned him what to expect if I found out he was mixed up in the rustling. I got him to talk tonight. He admitted that he'd lied about your whereabouts the night Ben Luray was murdered. But mostly I burned him out because he hired Bucky Hogan to gun for me."

"Hogan! That's news to me."

"Plenty you don't know, I guess."

"Meaning you're on the outs with John Singleton because of his wife?"

"Heard about that, did you?"

"I've still got a couple friends around."

"You'll need them to bury you," Sands said, "if we don't get out of here. Let's head for the hills. I don't like flat country. Since there's a bounty on my hide, I've become partial to rough country."

They rode on, holding their horses to a walk, heading toward the hills separating the Bench from Circle-S range.

Nolan said, "You satisfied now that I was framed?" He didn't wait for Sands' reply. "I was a long time in seeing it,

but I've got it figured out now. I was sure a sucker. Tip Harmon and the others drifted in on my spread, claimed they were tired of working at cowpunching. I knew the whole bunch. They were my kind. So they gave me a hand at building traps and catching wild horses. They even helped me break some of the mustangs we caught. I never paid them wages. Couldn't. Just fed them. They'd spent a lot of time at Crimp's and at Black Timbers, or so they said. But they really spent the time stealing Snake-in-the-Hole cattle. And, damn them, they always got me drunk when they pulled a raid, and when I'm drunk I don't know what's going on."

"That all you've got figured out?"

"No. They had some help from somebody on Circle-S."

"Chris Harmon."

"He was one, sure. Pete Bixler too, I'd bet. And Matt Hagarthy."

"Why Hagarthy?"

"Nothing happens around Circle-S that he doesn't know about," Nolan said angrily. "I always did wonder why he couldn't put a stop to the rustling. When he was so anxious to pin it on me, I figured he needed somebody to blame it on to cover up his own crookedness. I'd bet my right arm that Matt Hagarthy gets a cut of the money for the stolen cattle. And Crimp too."

"And Able Clayton," Sands told him.

"Clayton?"

"A hunch of mine."

"I can't see that, Sands."

"Clayton set you up as a rancher there in the badlands," Sands said. "Did it ever get him anything? Did he make a profit out of it?"

"I pay him a part of what money I make from the sale of mustangs," Russ Nolan said thoughtfully. "I ain't much for business, or even for handling money. But it seems as though he put a lot more into my spread than he'll ever get out. You think he sent Tip Harmon and his crowd up there with orders to steal Circle-S cattle?"

"I figure it."

"Penny-ante stuff for a man like Able."

Sands nodded. "That's how it looks to me. So Clayton is

after something bigger." He told Nolan that he suspected that Clayton was after the Bench for himself and, in cahoots with Stace Henderson, hoped to get the entire Circle-S away from Singleton eventually. "It'd mean killing Singleton," he said. "But men have been killed for less. Then with Mrs. Singleton a widow —"

"There'd be only Laurie to get rid of," Nolan broke in. He swore. "I can believe it. All of it. Listen, Sands, Singleton's wife used to come to the horse camp when I worked for Circle-S. She tried her best to get next to me. Another man might have taken her up on it, but — well, I never was much of a hand with women." He was silent a moment, thinking about that.

"What about Claire Singleton?" Sands prompted.

"All her playing up to me was to get me to do something for her," Nolan said. "She wasn't trying to get in with me, just trying to get around me. She wanted to do something she couldn't do herself, kill a man. She let me know that straight out. But I got the idea. When she saw that I wouldn't do it, she didn't say who she wanted killed. And then I couldn't figure out who it was. But now I know. Sands, that woman wanted me to kill her husband!"

"That's the one queer thing about the scheme."

"Why queer? They'll have to get rid of Singleton, somehow."

"Yeah. But if they had the thing worked out, why didn't they have somebody hired to kill Singleton? Able Clayton would know of men who kill for pay — Bucky Hogan for one. But Bucky was hired to kill me, not Singleton. It Stace Henderson is a big-town confidence man like I think, he could have brought a hired killer along from Chicago. Why'd they run the risk of having Claire approach you?"

"Don't ask me," Nolan said. "But she sure did want me to kill —" He fell silent, reined in, listened intently.

Sands heard it, too. A bunch of riders was coming along the road behind them. Nolan said, "Let's get out of here." He lifted his horse to a run, and Sands followed him. The hills were not far ahead, but now riders loomed through the darkness in front of the two men. Sands yelled a warning and swung off the road, but Russ Nolan was a little slow in

following his example. Guns racketed, powder flashes stabbed the darkness. Russ Nolan cried out. Glancing back, Sands saw Nolan and his horse go down under the manhunters' guns.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NOLAN'S bad luck was a break for Sands. The men who downed Nolan stopped to see whom they had dropped, giving Sands time to take to the brush. He kept his gray horse running hard until he was well into the hills, then pulled it in to listen and to let it blow. They came after him, and for a time, an hour or more, they made an aimless search. A pair of riders passed close to where he sat his horse, a couple shadowy figures unaware that the man they hunted had them in the sights of his rifle for one long moment.

The search petered out finally, and Sands knew how the manhunters' minds worked. They tried to figure out what their quarry would do, and they came to the conclusion that he would continue his wild flight. And, so thinking, they considered it useless to continue the search in the immediate vicinity. After a time Sands saw a fire lighted back where they had gunned down Nolan, and it was then that he thought it possible that Nolan hadn't been killed.

He drifted down from the hills, aiming in the general direction of the fire, then dismounted in a clump of trees perhaps a quarter of a mile from it. He went on afoot, silently working his way forward, pausing often to listen and peer about. He could hear their voices and soon could see them limned against the glare of the fire. There were a dozen men. Apparently, tonight had been chosen for a showdown hunt. Most of them were dismounted, their horses standing ground-hitched, and only a couple remained in the saddle. Sands located a brush-grown hollow and [illegible] in it. He could see John Singleton and several Circle-S hands, one of them the Indian-faced Pete Bixler. Others were strangers to him, and several he couldn't get a good look at from his position. He did not see Matt Haggarthy.

Russ Nolan was there, sitting on the ground, a dazed look on his face and handcuffs on his wrists. A burly man of

about fifty stood over Nolan. He was florid of face, gray at the temples and of mustache. He wore a dark suit, a narrow brimmed gray Stetson, and an air of authority. The sheriff that Laurie had talked about, Sands decided.

There wasn't any chance of getting Nolan away from them, but Sands decided that the lawman's presence would keep the prisoner from being harmed. The sheriff was trying to question Nolan, it seemed, and Nolan was either too dazed or too stubborn to answer. Pete Bixler shoved past the sheriff, kicked Nolan in the chest, knocked him over onto his side. The lawman grabbed Bixler and flung him violently back before he could kick again, and his voice rose in sudden anger.

Nolan was wise in not blurting out what he knew, what he suspected. Or so it seemed to Sands. It wasn't likely that even an impartial lawman would believe a protest from Nolan that he was but the victim of a frame-up, and of a plot against John Singleton.

Sands turned away, went back to his horse.

He swung to the saddle but held the gray in while he tried to make up his mind where to go. He didn't want to return to the Lost Squaw's gorge.

He was suddenly sick of hiding out and of running.

Laurie tried not to think of what happened in the gorge, but she kept reliving every moment of the nightmare. She could not will her mind to be blank. She knew that activity would help her forget. If she could only ride somewhere. . . . But she dared not. It was not a night to be riding, not with the range swarming with manhunters. Some of those riders – for they were not all dependable Circle-S hands – would be trigger-nervous. They would be apt to shoot at any moving thing in the dark, to shoot first and investigate afterwards.

Her father and Sheriff Cole were gone from Circle-S headquarters when she got home, and all the riders were out. She had learned from Arch, the Negro cook, that the manhunters were going to fine-comb the Bench tonight.

Laurie had no real fear that either Sands or Nolan would be caught. They were far too clever to be hunted down at night. But it wouldn't be safe to ride tonight. . . . So Laurie

stayed in her room and tried to rid her mind of Bucky Hogan. She was lying across her bed.

She heard Claire leave her room and go downstairs, heard her talking a moment later to the Chinese servant. She sat up suddenly, gripped by an idea. There was something she could do, something that would keep her busy for a time and get her mind off that afternoon's nightmare. She removed her boots, so that she would make no noise in leaving her room. She opened her door, listened, made sure that Claire wasn't returning, then she hurried along the hallway to her stepmother's room.

The door was open, and the lamp on the bedside table glowed dimly. Laurie hesitated a moment, suddenly reluctant to spy; then, with a shrug, she entered the room. She sniffed. It reeked of perfume — expensive perfume — but still she found the heavy scent offensive. She had come to dislike everything about the woman.

She began an aimless search, not knowing what she was looking for. She went through the drawers in the bureau, peeked into the washstand, opened the jewelry box on the dressing table. There was nothing, nothing but a tidiness of Claire's personal things. Laurie went to the closet, opened it, gasped at the array of dresses and coats and suits. At the numerous hat boxes on the high shelf. One hat box, a leather one for traveling, caught Laurie's eye because in all that room it alone was not in order. Its lid was not in place. She reached for it, lifted the hinged lid, saw that it contained not a hat but a number of old letters.

Laurie was still in her riding clothes, and she sank to the floor in cowhand fashion. She held the box on her crossed legs, took out a bundle of letters tied together with a crimson ribbon. She recognized the handwriting on the envelopes as her father's, and knew that they were love letters that he had written while he was courting Claire. She slipped them back into the box, gripped by a sense of guilt. The other letters were from Chicago business houses and were receipted bills. Except for one: it was addressed to Mrs. John Singleton, Circle-S Ranch, Rawlins, Wyoming. The return address in the upper lefthand corner was "Stace Henderson, Regent Hotel, Chicago, Ill."

Laurie's guilt dissolved and excitement replaced it. This was what she had been looking for; somehow she knew that. She slipped the letter from the envelope, unfolded it, began to read. Then she heard a rider come in, so she rose and ran to the window. She saw a rider crossing the ranch-yard toward the corral, and, despite the darkness outside, she recognized Ed Sands. She forgot the letter, except to thrust it into her pocket, and turned to the door.

It opened before she reached it, and Claire stood there staring at her.

Laurie halted briefly, lifted her head defiantly, then started out again more slowly. Claire glanced at the open closet, saw the hat box on the floor before the door, and looked back at Laurie with dismay.

"I didn't think this of you, Laurie," she said thickly. "I – "

"All right," Laurie broke in. "So I've been snooping."

"It's not very nice of you. It's really not like you."

"But it's time somebody did some prying, isn't it?"

"Laurie – "

Claire tried to catch hold of her arm, but Laurie eluded her and ran out into the hall. She descended the stairs two at a time, dashed across the hallway below. Sands was dismounting by the corrals when she reached the veranda. "Ed!" she cried. It burst out of her.

Sands gave her a smile, no other greeting. He dropped saddle and bridle to the ground, took his catch-rope, then opened the corral gate. He hazed the gray into the pen, then without losing any time, he dropped his loop on a fresh horse. Laurie closed the gate once he led the animal out. She was beside herself with excitement, and said, "Ed! Ed, what's happened?"

He said, reaching for his saddle, "They've got Russ, Laurie."

"Oh, no!"

"He's not hurt. And no harm will come to him while he's the law's prisoner."

"[illegible] you, Ed? What are you going to do?"

"I'm done with running and hiding," Sands told, swinging [illegible] onto the horse. "I've got this thing worked out – [illegible] a guard, at least. I got some truth out of the Crimps,

and I'll get some more out of Able Clayton. I'm riding to Rawlins, honey." He tightened the cinches. "They'll come in some time tonight. Singleton and the sheriff will bring Russ in, at least. You tell them, Laurie, that I'll be back before morning — with Clayton."

"But the danger, Ed!"

"Hell," Sands said. Then: "Russ is in the worst spot. They'll bring him to trial for Ben Luray's murder. And for rustling. All Singleton has got against me is Claire's claim that I tried to attack her."

"It's Henderson, Ed. Bring him, not Clayton."

"One or the other. I guess it doesn't make much difference."

"It's Henderson," Laurie insisted. "Listen, Ed, I found a letter in Claire's room. A letter from Henderson. I haven't read it through, but I read enough to know that they were friendly — too friendly — before she married my father. It's the proof we've needed."

"A part of it, maybe."

"If you brought him here . . ."

"All right. I'll bring him instead of Clayton," Sands told her. It'll be easier to get the truth out of him, anyway. Clayton's too shrewd and tough." He swung to the saddle. "Maybe we'll settle this crazy business tonight, Laurie."

He swung away, headed across the ranchyard.

Laurie called a tremulous "Ed!" after him. She was afraid for him, he knew. She was thinking that the people of Rawlins knew about the bounty offer and that some of them might try to collect it.

Except for a few scattered lights, Rawlins was dark when Sands rode into the town. There were a few horses tied to the hitchracks in front of the saloons, but the street was deserted of people. Sands' horse was heaving hard: he'd pushed it hard all the way. He held it to a walk now, coming in the single street of Rawlins.

The windows of the Rawlins Headquarters Company, Able Clayton's office, were dark. Sands considered them a moment, then swung over to the hotel. He dismounted, climbed to the porch, his legs stiff from so long a time in the saddle, and en-

tered the lobby. It was deserted, dimly lighted by a single lamp with its wick turned low. He went to the desk and drew the register to him. He turned the pages, searching for Henderson's signature. It was a half-dozen pages back, for he'd registered some months ago, and in back of his name the hotel proprietor had written the number "10" which Sands took to be that of Henderson's room.

He turned to the stairs, and the glow of a bracket lamp in the upper hallway showed him the numbers of the dozen rooms on the second floor. He listened at the door to Number 10, heard nothing. He tried the doorknob. The door was locked, but it gave slightly under pressure. Sands put his shoulder to it, applied more pressure, and the flimsy lock snapped. He swung into the room as he pushed the door wide and saw Henderson in bed. The man was a light sleeper and roused now. He sat up, stared at Sands, then twisted about and fumbled beneath his pillow. Sands drew his gun, brought the barrel down in a hard blow against the man's arm. Henderson gasped, jerked his hand, still empty, from under the pillow.

"Leave your gun where it is," Sands told him. "And get yourself out of bed and into your clothes."

Henderson swore and said thickly, "What's wrong with you, man? What's this all about, anyway?"

Sands said, "I've got no time to talk. Do as I tell you!"

He pulled the bed covers off Henderson, caught him by the arm, jerked him off the bed. Henderson scrambled a little to keep from falling to the floor. Then, getting his balance, he said thickly, "You must be mad, Sands. And it's only sensible to humor a madman. Do you mind telling me why I should get dressed?"

"You and I are taking a little trip."

"And just where do you think I'm going with you?"

"I know where you're going with me — to Circle-S," Sands told him. "Now get into your clothes or I'll drag you out of here in your nightshirt!"

Henderson's bewilderment could have been genuine for a moment, but now, as he muttered again that Sands was a madman, it was mere pretense. But fear was growing in him, if no pretense at all, and he turned to the chair which held his

clothes. There was light filtering in from the hall, making it easier for Henderson to dress and permitting Sands to see that there was no gun concealed in the man's clothing. Henderson was actually trembling.

He was finally dressed and tried another protest. "Sands, there's no need for such highhanded methods," he said in a bargaining tone. "If it's a matter of money with you . . . Well, Singleton can't be paying you much."

"Who's talking about money, mister?"

"I'm trying to be reasonable."

"Let's get out of here," Sands said and gave him a push toward the door.

They went down to the lobby, out to the street to Sands' horse. He said, "To the livery stable, friend." He gestured with his gun. "And don't get a notion that you'll yell for help. I've got nothing to lose if I shoot you. It won't put me in any worse spot than I'm already in. Get moving and keep your mouth shut."

Henderson turned obediently, if sullenly.

There was a scraping sound as a window sash was raised, then a voice — Able Clayton's booming voice — bellowed, "Drop down, Stace!" And a gunshot crashed. Sands heard the whine of the slug as he whirled. He had a glimpse of Clayton's bulky person at one of the office windows over the hardware store. He threw himself sideways and down as Clayton's gun crashed again, then fired from the ground. His aim was better than Clayton's. There was a scream from the fat man, and he fell forward across the window sill and he hung there loosely and very still, his bald head and pudgy arms out of the window.

Sands leaped up and swung onto his horse. He rode at Henderson, who had dropped to the ground at Clayton's shout and now was rising, and said [illegible]. "Get one of those horses over by that [illegible] Henderson, [illegible] to move to keep from being ridden down.

Three men, one a bartender, came running from the saloon as Sands, leaning from the saddle, jerked loose the reins of one of the horses there. One of the men yelled, "Hold on, dam it! That's my bronc!" He lunged forward, then froze at the sight of Sands' levelled gun.

Sands told him, "Get a mount at the livery stable. Circle-S will pay for it. You'll get this horse back tomorrow." He gigged his own mount at Henderson, saying, "Get up!"

Henderson mounted with haste, as though lifted by fear — fear that had come to him with Clayton's death. They turned away together, and behind them somebody shouted, "That's Sands! That's Sands, I tell you!"

Sands glanced back as he followed Henderson toward the edge of town, and the saloons were emptying of their customers. Some of the men were mounting their horses, intending to give chase. Sands swore under his breath. Alone, he might be able to lose them. But burdened with Henderson, he would need a lot of luck to keep beyoud reach of their guns. He didn't think much of his luck, however, as they loped away from Rawlins through the darkness along the west road. His luck was far from good tonight. Clayton's appearance at his window was proof of that. The fat man couldn't have been watching for him. . . . Sands looked back again, and there were three riders. They were coming fast, on horses that hadn't been pushed as hard as Sands' was tonight. He yelled at Henderson to pull up, and, when the man obeyed, Sands reached for his rifle and dropped from the saddle.

He sank down to one knee, beaded the oncoming trio, then fired a warning shot over their heads. He had no real quarrel with them and no desire to shoot them. He meant to make a try at scaring them off. They reined in so abruptly that one's horse reared high. Sands fired twice more, putting the rifle slugs close enough for them to know that he could target them by lowering his sights. One turned back immediately, then the other two, swearing bitterly, reluctantly followed. Sands rose, turned, saw that Henderson had lightailed it. The man had left the road and cut across the range.

Sands mounted, rode after him.

It wasn't too difficult to head him off, for Henderson was [illegible] to circle back toward town and he wasn't much of a horseman.

[illegible] returned to the house, Claire was descending

the stairs. The two women halted and gazed at each other, Laurie's eyes hostile, Claire's bleak. After a long moment Claire asked, "What are you going to do with that letter, Laurie?"

"Just what you think I'm going to do with it!"

"Must you? Is there no other way?"

"Maybe you can suggest another way."

Claire sighed, sank to the steps, leaned her auburn head against the newel post. "No," she said thickly. "I'd do the same in your place. But there's one thing – one thing you must believe. I'm in love with my husband."

"You have a funny way of showing it," Laurie said bitterly. "You and your men. You and Stace Henderson!"

"It's not as it seems, Laurie."

"I'll take some convincing. So will my father."

"If I could only explain –"

"If you only could. But the best explanation you could dream up wouldn't stop me from doing what I'm going to do," Laurie told her. "That was Sands out there. The man you –"

Claire lifted her head. There was a look of pain in her eyes. "I'm sorry about what I did to him," she said. "But it was the only thing I could do – to save myself, to save my husband's love. Sands was going to tell John a terrible thing about me. It wasn't true. No part of it was true. But John might have believed it. Why, he accused me of plotting with Stace Henderson to murder my husband!"

"And you deny it?"

"Do you think too that I would do such a thing?"

Laurie pulled the letter from her pocket. "What about this?" she demanded. "Do you still deny that Henderson and you are friendly, – very friendly?"

Claire flushed, bit her lower lip, and it was a long moment before she spoke. Then: "You could never understand, Laurie. You've lived a sheltered life. You've never had to wonder where your next meal was coming from. I did . . . often. I was alone in the world. I had no home. I did become an actress, not such a good actress that I made money or won a respectable position. Much of the time I didn't have parts.

But I always had to eat, always had to have a place to sleep."

"And so you got in with Stace Henderson?"

"Yes," Claire said brokenly. "He – he was one." She looked miserable, ashamed. "There were others, too. I'll admit that to you, Laurie because you'll have to understand, somehow. John would have been just another man, but I fell in love with him. For the first time in my life I found a man I cared about. So I married him. I told myself that the past didn't matter, that only the future counted. But Stace Henderson wouldn't have it that way."

"So he followed you here," Laurie said. "He wouldn't give you up."

"It's not because he really wants me."

"What, then?"

"He wanted money," Claire said. "He knew that I'd married a rich man, and he knew too that he could frighten me into giving him money. Which I did."

"Why?"

"Can't you see, Laurie?"

"He blackmailed you?"

Claire nodded. "I gave him as much money as I could get from John without making him wonder why I needed so much," she said. "It wasn't enough. I had to give Stace some of my jewels. I gave him more money the night of the party, and he still demands more. He'll see to it that John learns what I was if I don't give him money. And I can't – I just can't have that!"

"Why not? You said the past doesn't matter."

"It doesn't keep me from being in love with my husband. But John is insanely jealous. You know that, Laurie. If he knew what I had been . . ."

Laurie stared at her frowningly, uncertain. "I want to believe this," she said. "But – well, I just can't. Henderson wouldn't stay around these parts just for blackmail money. He wouldn't be partners with Able Clayton if that was all he's after. Claire, I think Ed Sands is right."

Claire sat there on the steps, a beaten look around her. "I've told you the truth," she said. "I can't do more." She [illegible] a moment. "I did wrong. It was wrong to think that I [illegible] a right to be happy. I made a mistake in marrying John

Singleton; and then, after I was his wife, I made a mistake in using his money to buy Stace's silence. I should have found another way. I tried. I was frightened enough and I hated Stace enough to want to kill him. I should have killed him, but I lacked the courage." She looked levelly at Laurie. "That's why I seemed interested in Russ Nolan. I thought he was the kind of man who . . . Well, he wouldn't. He wouldn't kill a man for me. I messed up his life by approaching him. And afterwards I didn't dare tell John why I'd appeared interested in Russ."

"And Russ was too decent to tell Dad."

"Yes. . . . Yes, I suppose he was. But I never told him that it was Henderson I wanted him to – to kill."

Laurie was becoming convinced. "You should have confided in me," she said. "Russ would have gotten rid of Henderson if I'd asked him to. Maybe he wouldn't have killed him, but he would have scared him badly enough that that tinhorn wouldn't have dared bother you again."

"I – I couldn't have told you."

"You've told me now when it's too late."

"And now you'll really hate me."

Laurie didn't reply to that, but it made her feel a quick guilt. She said, "It looks as though I make mistakes, too."

She broke off as footsteps sounded on the porch. The door swung open and Matt Hagarthy entered. She saw something on Hagarthy's dark, rough-hewn face that had never been there before; it was a play of aroused feelings, but what feelings she could not tell. To Laurie, Matt Hagarthy had never seemed a creature of flesh and blood. That his forbidding countenance should show violent emotions now disturbed her.

She said, almost defensively, "Dad isn't here. He –"

Hagarthy cut in, his voice harsh. "I'm not looking for him. I know where he is, and the rest of the crowd. They've got Russ Nolan. They're bringing him in. I want to see you. I was hunting alone after we got Nolan. I ran into Sands up in the hills. . . . Put a slug in him." He paused, watching her face. "Got him deep center, but he didn't fall off his horse. He gave me the slip in the dark. He'll make it back to his hideout, I reckon, but he must be in a pretty bad way."

Laurie stared at him, her eyes round with bewilderment. She thought, *Why are you lying to me, Matt?* Aloud she said, "Why did you want to tell me this?"

"Well, I had an idea you were interested in him."

"What would give you such an idea?"

He frowned, scowled. "You take his side with your father," he said. "You were all broken up about him the night of the party when Henderson gun-whipped him. I've got eyes. I see things. You and Sands . . . Hell, if you don't care about him being out there alone with a slug in him, all right." He turned to the door.

Laurie said, "Now I'm supposed to run out, saddle my horse, and ride to him. You think I may know where he's hiding out and that I'll lead you to him."

He swung around, gave her an ugly look.

Laurie said, "It won't work, Matt. It wasn't very bright of you." She would have laughed, had she not been afraid of him. "You see, Ed Sands was here less than half an hour ago!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HAGARTHY looked stunned for a moment, then anger exploded in him. He said savagely, "You're lying!" He called her an obscene name and with three long strides he was upon her. Laurie was too surprised to move, and his hands closed on her arms so hard she could hardly keep from crying out. He shook her violently, demanded, "Where is he now? What was he doing here?" She clamped her lips together. He let go of her left arm, struck her across the face. Her head rocked back, and she was momentarily blinded by pain. She heard a flurry of movement, then saw, as her vision cleared, that Claire had risen and rushed forward. She had grabbed Hagarthy's gun from its holster, and now, backing beyond his reach, she held it with both hands and, aiming it at Hagarthy, cocked it.

"Hagarthy," Claire said, her voice surprisingly calm, "take your hands off her."

Hagarthy turned to face her, releasing Laurie.

He [illegible] at her for a long moment, his face a stiff and [illegible] rage. Then he turned abruptly and went out,

slamming the door. Claire was very pale and she began to tremble. Laurie went to her, took the gun from her shaking hands, eased it off cock.

"Tell me," Laurie said, "did you ever shoot a gun?"

"No — no, never."

They did something together then for the very first time: they laughed.

It was a rather hollow sound, but still it was laughter.

And Laurie suddenly knew that when people could laugh together they couldn't go on hating one another. . . .

It was long after midnight when Sands arrived at Circle-S with Henderson, but both the ranchhouse and the bunk-house were still lighted. Sands swung over to the ranchhouse steps, dismounted, and said, "All right. This is it. Get down." Henderson sullenly obeyed. They mounted to the porch, and Sands opened the door without knocking. There was a rumble of voices from the living room, and Sands pushed Henderson in that direction.

The voices fell silent as the two men entered the room, and the people there stared at them: John Singleton, standing in the center of the room, peered in a rather dazed way; Laurie, by the fireplace, looked anxiously; Russ Nolan, still handcuffed and slumped in a chair, with eagerness lighting his eyes. Claire Singleton, on a sofa, was very pale and her gaze wavered; Matt Hagarthy, across the room and lounging against the wall, kept his face blank but there was an ugly look in his eyes. The burly lawman eyed Sands and Henderson with curiosity, then rose from his chair and faced them,

"I'm Harry Cole," he said. "Sheriff of this county." He had sized up the two of them with eyes surprisingly shrewd in an otherwise bland face. "You're Stace Henderson, of course. And you —" looking at Sands — "you're Ed Sands."

Sands nodded, and said, "You've got it right, Cole. Did Miss Singleton tell you why I was coming in and why I was bringing Henderson?"

"There's been a lot of talk here during the past hour," Cole said. "And it just about confuses everything. I was called in to investigate the rustling of Circle-S cattle and the murder of a Circle-S hand named Ben Luray. I was told that Nolan here was the man I should pick up. Now Miss Single-

ton tells me, among other things, that Nolan is the victim of a frame-up."

"Don't let it confuse you, Sheriff," Sands said. "It's the truth."

"You're a friend of Nolan's, Sands?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I am."

"And Miss Singleton and Nolan have also been friends?"

"I've been told so."

Cole nodded. "Then the two of you would naturally stick by him," he said. "You'd do your best to shield him, wouldn't you?"

Sands shrugged, took out makings, started to roll a cigarette. "That could be," he admitted. "But I hired on with John Singleton to stop the rustling of Circle-S cattle. If a man pays me to do a job, I do it. If Nolan had been in on the rustling, I would have found evidence of it and done something about him. But I found nothing to connect him with the rustling except that the rustlers used his ranch as a hang-out. He was framed. The guilty men knew there'd come a time when Singleton would try to run them down, so they kept Nolan as a hole-card. He was the scapegoat."

"What convinced you of that?"

"The fact that Nolan wasn't with the rustlers the night Ben Luray was killed. He was too drunk that night. Besides, he spent part of the time here at Circle-S headquarters and the rest of it over at Crimp's Place. Crimp and his wife lied when they said that Nolan hadn't slept there that night. They admitted to me that they lied. If you want Crimp's testimony, have him brought here. Send somebody after him."

Cole eyed him frowningly. "I was going to mention Crimp," he said. "Somebody burned him out tonight. I understand that it was you, Sands."

"I burned him out."

"Why?"

"It was something I promised him," Sands said. "The first time I went over there, Crimp tried to kill me. Because I found the hide off a Circle S steer at his place. I told him I'd burn him out if I found out that he was in with the rustlers. I found it out. I hadn't gone far before he sent a couple of the rustlers after me to gun me down. One of them was Tip

Harmon. The other I'll be able to identify if I ever happen upon him. I don't know what Crimp's job was, but – well, he was in on the rustling. And he helped frame Russ Nolan." Sands paused to light his cigarette. Then: "That was part of it. The other part was Crimp's hiring Bucky Hogan to bushwhack me."

"Bucky Hogan!" Cole exclaimed. "He's on this range?"

"That's right. But not alive now."

"You killed him?"

"I killed him in self defense."

The sheriff's face was losing its blandness, turning hard. "You're sure a man to raise hell, Sands," he said. "But all we have to justify your raising it is your word. What evidence have you that –"

Laurie broke in, saying, "I saw it. I was a witness. Hogan came to Ed's hide-out." She flushed, bit her lower lip, then gave her head a defiant toss. "Yes, I was there. I knew that Ed was the victim of a frame-up just as Russ was. I saw Bucky Hogan try to kill him, and Hogan told me, before Ed showed up, that Crimp was paying him to kill Ed Sands."

Cole said, "All right. So you burned out Crimp and you killed Hogan in self-defense. But a Circle-S rider, Chris Harmon, was killed when you set fire to that place. You didn't kill him. Nolan did. According to the two women and the old man up there. Maybe Nolan didn't kill Ben Luray, but witnesses say he killed Harmon."

"What's Nolan himself say?"

"He admits shooting Harmon."

Sands nodded. "Harmon was gunning for me," he said. "Nolan shot him to save my life. Sure, Chris Harmon was a Circle-S hand. But he was involved in the rustling. He and Pete Bixler and maybe some more of the Circle-S crew." He slanted a look at Matt Hagarthy, but the ranch boss merely stared back at him without speaking. Sands went on. "Crimp will tell you about Chris Harmon and Pete Bixler if you want to bother to find him."

Henderson had been silent all this while, but now he blurted out, "Sheriff, this Sands is a madman! All these killings prove that. Ask him what happened in Rawlins tonight. Make him tell you what happened to Able Clayton!" Henderson

swung around, pointed an accusing finger at Sands. "He makes out that everybody he's killed or had killed is a rustler. But when he kills a respectable citizen like Clayton —"

Cole broke in, "Is this the truth, Sands? Another killing?" Sands nodded. "Clayton took a couple shots at me from his office window when I brought Henderson from the hotel," he said. "Find his gun, and you'll see a couple fired shells in it." He smiled wryly. "Self-defense again, Sheriff."

The lawman swore under his breath.

Sands said, "I intended to get around to Clayton. He and Crimp were brothers, and Crimp says Clayton gave him orders to help frame Russ Nolan for the rustling. Clayton had set Nolan up as a rancher in the badlands, then sent Tip Harmon and the others up there to move in with Nolan. Clayton planned the whole deal."

"He's lying!" Henderson said, almost yelling it. "A man like Clayton —"

"Clayton planned it," Sands interrupted. "At first he wanted the Bench. He hoped to hurt Singleton badly enough through the rustling for Singleton to sell him the Bench. Later on, when he teamed up with Henderson, he wanted something more: Circle-S Ranch."

Henderson muttered, "He lies. The man is mad!"

Laurie came to Sands, put a hand on his arm, and said, "Ed, Claire has told us about her — her relationship with Henderson. We were wrong in thinking she was in on the plot. It was Henderson she wanted Russ to kill."

Sands glanced at Claire, saw how miserable she looked. He glanced at John Singleton and understood the man's dazed expression. He said, "All right, Laurie. So I was wrong about that." He wondered if he had been, if Claire's admissions hadn't been deception to cover up the uglier thing. "But the whole trouble on this range stemmed from Clayton and Henderson wanting to get control of the Bench — and maybe Circle-S. I'm convinced those two planned Singleton's death. With Mrs. Singleton a widow, they figured that she would again take up with Henderson. And if he married her, he would control Circle-S."

"It's a lie," Henderson said wildly. "There's not a bit of truth in it!"

"You deny it?" Cole said, eying him narrowly.

"Of course I deny it, Sheriff."

"All right," Cole said and gave Sands a meaningful look out of his shrewd eyes. "It's only Sands' word against yours. Sands will take you back to town."

Henderson gave Sands a frightened look. "No!" he gasped. "I won't leave here with him. You can't force me to, Sheriff!"

"Sands brought you. Why shouldn't he take you back?"

Henderson was pale, trembling. "He'll kill me," he said thickly. "I'd never get back to Rawlins. He'd kill me like he killed Clayton. Can't you see that, Sheriff?"

Sands caught him by the arm. "Come on, friend," he said. He understood what was in the lawman's mind. "Let's go. No harm's going to come to you on the way back. Not unless you should attack me. Then I might shoot you. But if you behave and —"

Henderson broke away from him. "It's a trick!" he cried. There was genuine terror in him. "You know he'll kill me, you —" He called Harry Cole an obscene name. "All you Westerners are alike. You stick together and uphold each other. He'll kill me, and you'll let him!"

Sands said, "Well, you've got a choice. You can go with me and take what's coming to you, or you can stay, tell the truth and be safe." He had a hope now, in view of Henderson's terror, that the bluff would work. "Make up your mind, mister."

Henderson lifted a trembling hand to his face, and muttered, "All right. I'll talk." He looked about wildly, from face to face. But, seeing no ally there, he shuddered. "It was Clayton," he said hoarsely. "All of it. I'm just a con man, and I don't go in for murder. Claire was my mark, and I came here to take her for what I could. . . ."

Sands eyed him in disgust as the man talked in a whining voice. Henderson was a weakling; he was too much of one to be more than a blackmailer. He had gotten drunk one night, and Clayton had pumped him. Once Clayton learned what Henderson was up to, the fat man saw an opportunity to make use of him. Henderson swore that he had intended to back out when he got a chance, for what Clayton planned scared him. Clayton had meant to have Singleton murdered;

then, he believed, Henderson could marry Claire and he would control the Circle-S through Henderson.

"That's the truth," he said. "All of it. I asked Claire for money, and she gave it to me. She didn't have to give it to me. I wouldn't have harmed her. I wouldn't have talked. I swear it." He looked about again, silently begging somebody to believe him. "I didn't have anything to do with the rustling or the killings. I never got a cent out of the rustling. It was Clayton!"

Sands said, "You knew all about it, though."

"I didn't dare go to the law about it!"

"What was Crimp's part in it?"

"He was the contact between the rustlers and the man who bought the cattle," Henderson said. "He arranged the sale, then later he collected the money. He paid off Tip Harmon and his men and gave Hagarthy his cut. He —"

John Singleton spoke for the first time. "You, Matt?" he said disbelievingly. "You were in on it?"

Hagarthy was darker, craggier than ever. "If you're taking this tinhorn's word for it, what good would it do for me to deny anything?" he said harshly. He shoved away from the wall, faced Singleton. "Maybe he's right," he went on. "If he is, I was only getting what was due me. A small part of it. There was a time when you promised me a partnership. A promise you never kept. So to hell with you!"

He swung around, started toward the door.

Cole said, "Hold on, Hagarthy. You're not walking out on —"

Hagarthy turned on him. "Don't fool yourself, Sheriff," he said. "Singleton's not going to prefer charges against me, and I'm not admitting anything. As for this tinhorn . . . What court would accept his testimony once a smart lawyer has shown him up for what he is? No, you're not holding me, Cole."

"You're forgetting something, Hagarthy."

"Yeah? What's that, Sheriff?"

"It's not just a matter of some stolen cattle," Cole said. "A man was murdered: Ben Luray. He was murdered by the rustlers, and since you were involved with them, you're an accessory to murder."

That jolted Hagarthy, and a look of alarm clouded his face. He dropped a hand to his gun holster, then swore. Sands was surprised, too; Hagarthy's holster was empty. Cole moved over between Hagarthy and the door.

"I'm holding you," he said. "And I'll want Pete Bixler." He took a key from his pocket, tossed it to Sands. "Take those bracelets off Nolan," he said. Then, looking back at Hagarthy, "Make it easier for yourself, friend. Who was it gunned down Ben Luray?"

Hagarthy gave him a murky look and said nothing.

Russ Nolan said, once Sands had removed the handcuffs, "Tip Harmon is probably your killer. If not him, one of his crowd. You'd better round up the whole bunch, Cole. Crimp included."

Sands took the handcuffs to Cole, and the sheriff considered Hagarthy a moment and then, with a shrug, pocketed them. He said, "Sands, you and Nolan consider yourself deputized. Bring Hagarthy and Henderson along. We'll get horses and take them to Rawlins where they can be locked up. I'll go to the bunkhouse and get Pete Bixler."

He led the way, Hagarthy and Henderson followed, and Sands and Nolan brought up the rear. Laurie picked up a gun from the sofa where Claire sat, gave it to Russ Nolan with an explanation that puzzled Sands. She told Nolan, "It's Hagarthy's." Sands wondered who had managed to disarm Matt Hagarthy.

They crossed the veranda, descended the steps, and Sands said abruptly, "Wait a minute, Sheriff. There's something not right about this."

He went to his horse, pulled the rifle from its saddle. He peered about, but saw nothing that should have alarmed him. But the feeling that something was wrong persisted. There were a dozen, a score, of places about the dark ranchyard where a man could be posted with a gun—say, a man like Pete Bixler.

Hagarthy gave a short bark of laughter. "You look easy, Sands," he said. "What are you scared of?" He laughed again in that mirthless way. "Maybe you're right, Sands. Maybe Pete is out there. Maybe I did expect trouble and —"

A horse somewhere stamped and swished, and there was

a jingle of a bit chain. It was not either of the nearby mounts that Sands and Henderson had ridden, and there wouldn't be, Sands knew, a bridled horse in the corrals. He moved slowly out into the yard, levering a cartridge into the Winchester's firing chamber. He saw a movement over in the deep shadows alongside the barn and then made out the shape of a horse. Or two horses. There was a pair, all right, but he still couldn't see if there were riders up. He took another forward step, then glimpsed a glint of metal – a gun. Sands knew that one man, maybe two, crouched by the wall of the barn, and had him covered. "Pete?" he called. "That you, Pete?"

He got no answer.

"Listen," he said, his nerves knotting tight. "The game's over. This'll get you nowhere. Come on out, Pete, and bring along whoever is with you."

A voice said, "To hell with you, Sands!" It was a familiar voice but not Pete Bixler's. It went on, rising with anger, growing shrill. "You and Nolan! I want the pair of you! I know how you gunned down Chris, the two of you! Crimp told me, damn you!"

Russ Nolan yelled from across by the ranchhouse, "Watch it, Sands! That's Tip Harmon! Watch –"

A gun blazed, roared.

Sands felt the impact of the slug, was spun half around by it. He was hit in his left side, and from the sharp stabs of pain, he knew that at least one of his ribs was shattered. He felt his knees buckle and the whole of him pitching forward to the ground. And Tip Harmon's gun crashed again, and this slug ripped across his back like the cut of a lash. He sprawled out, and he did not think of dying; what flashed through his mind was the jolting thought that he had lost all that had come to mean so much to him, Laurie and the prospect of having one small part of the earth for himself. His brain was reeling, but he heard men yelling and guns blasting. It seemed improbable that so many men and so many guns were trying to kill him alone, and suddenly he knew that he was no longer the target.

He heard Russ Nolan yelling, and Tip Harmon was cursing back, cursing Snake-in-the-Hole. A man ran across the [illegible], passing close to Sands, and he shouted, "Give me

a gun! Give me a gun, damn it!" It was Matt Hagarthy. Sands heard the hard beat of Hagarthy's boots, heard them go on and then return. He knew that Hagarthy was coming for his guns, and he thrust himself up and, gaining his knees, he drew his six-gun. Hagarthy saw and retreated. He ran toward the bunkhouse.

Sands looked toward the ranchhouse, and Sheriff Cole was an inert shape on the ground. But Russ Nolan was on his feet, cutting loose with the gun he'd gotten from Laurie. And John Singleton was coming down the veranda steps, a rifle in his hands. Three guns were firing from the opposite side of the yard: Tip Harmon's and another man's from alongside the barn and someone else's – Pete Bixler's, Sands guessed – from beside the bunkhouse. Hagarthy was in and out of the bunkhouse in the space of a heart-beat, and now he turned a gun on Sands.

Sands lifted his revolver, squeezed the trigger, saw Hagarthy stagger. He fired again, missed. Then a rider came away from the barn at a hard run. It was Tip Harmon, and the rustler swung toward Sands. There was enough light for Sands to see Tip's boyish face convulsed with hate. Sands flung himself sideways, eluding the spooked animal's pounding hoofs. The pain in his side was so intense, stabbing into the core of him, that he almost fainted. The moment passed, and he levered himself up on his left elbow. Tip brought his horse around to make another attempt at riding him down. Sands swung his gun up, but Russ Nolan's shot caught Tip from behind. The horse swerved past Sands, and Tip's lifeless body tumbled from the animal ten feet away.

Hagarthy was still on his feet, still rawhide tough even with a slug in him. Tip had been cursing Circle-S, calling it Snake-in-the-Hole. But Matt Hagarthy was cursing Ed Sands; and he came toward Sands, lurching and swaying like a drunk, his gun beading Sands. It took two more slugs to stop Hagarthy, then a third to down him. Then, as he fell under Sands' gun, Hagarthy fired again. Sands felt one terrific shock of pain and then a swift descent into nothingness. Sands cried out, but the cry was merely a strangled gasp in his throat.

It was, then, over for him.

There was no doctor in Rawlins. They had to bring one out from the county seat, eighty miles away. They sent a rider to Rawlins to send a telegram, and the doctor had to come by train. It wasn't until late the following day that Doctor Vance Sharon arrived at Circle-S headquarters. He was a young man, but he had been an Army surgeon and so was a specialist where gunshot wounds were concerned. He frowned when he first bent over Ed Sands, still unconscious nearly twenty-four hours after the fight. But then, after an examination of Sands' wounds, young Doc Sharon said cheerfully, "Not as bad as he looks. There's a real good chance." It was then that Laurie Singleton began to live again with hope.

It was a long, hard pull for Ed Sands. For three days after the doctor's visit, he showed no interest in anything or anyone during the brief intervals that he was wakeful. Then abruptly he was stronger, his mind became clear again, and he was asking Laurie, who hardly left his bedside, questions as fast as she could answer them. He asked his questions in a shallow voice that seemed like a stranger's even to himself, but his curiosity — it was an anxious one — was proof that he was on the way to full recovery.

Everything was all right, Laurie told him. Everything. . . . He mustn't worry. He insisted upon knowing, so she told him that Matt Hagarthy and Tip Harmon had been killed; that Sheriff Cole's wound hadn't been serious; that the lawman, having deputized Russ Nolan, had arrested Pete Bixler and Will Crimp and Blackie Kearns, who had come to Circle-S with Tip to avenge Chris Harmon's death. They had been taken to jail at the county seat. Cole had investigated Able Clayton's death and convinced himself that Sands had killed him in self-defense. Henderson? He had gotten away. The blackmailer had fled during the fight; but Cole expected to have him picked up, as he expected to gather in the rest of Tip Harmon's crowd.

Sands had another question, but he kept putting it off. It wasn't until one evening when Laurie sat reading to him that he asked it. He interrupted her reading a romantic French novel which he would have found unendurably boring had he not liked to listen to her voice. He said, "Laurie, what about John and Claire?"

"Claire has gone, Ed," Laurie said gravely, putting down the book. "She couldn't stay after – well, after revealing her past to Dad."

"That's crazy. The past is gone – dead."

"Yes. So I told Dad."

"But he wouldn't have it so?"

"He had to fight it out with himself," Laurie said. "But he went after her, and I hope – well, I hope they come to an understanding, Ed. I really do. They're in love. They need each other." She shook her head, smiling wryly. "They're so much older than we are, Ed, and so much more foolish."

"My past doesn't bother you?"

"Your gunman past, Ed?"

"You sure were dead-set against me when you thought I was a gunman."

"And it's only the future that matters, ever."

Sands was propped up on pillows, and so was able to take her in his arms. He reached out his right hand to her and said, "The present is pretty important, too." Laurie left her chair, sat on the edge of the bed. "You make it important for me, honey," he said.

"More important than you think, Ed."

"What do you mean?"

"Circle-S needs a new ramrod. You may have the job if you wish."

"I don't wish," Sands said. "I don't want to work for another man, Laurie. I've got plans. I want to make a deal with John for a part of the Bench. I want a ranch of my own, a house of my own. Do you mind? Do you mind leaving Circle-S, Laurie?"

"With you?" Laurie said, leaning close, so close that her lips brushed his. "No. No, Ed, no!"

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